The future of electronic entertainment issue [illegible]

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Sony on test: PSX – the

Reviewed: Deus Ex: Inv

Onimusha Buraiden, Pa

1080° Avalanche, GT4: Pr

Plus: From

how gaming will change

PLAYSTATION2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC | GBA

PSX



Home improvements, Sony style

Can this all-in-one entertainment box revolutionise videogaming?

51:22:56N
2:21:51W



The appearance of a console is never as important as what it's capable of doing, of course, but that doesn't stop us having strong opinions on the aesthetic aspect of videogame boxes. Indeed, you only have to recall the widespread derision aimed at Microsoft's design for evidence of how critical gamers can be when it comes to how something is going to complement – or clutter – their living rooms. Opinion on Sony's new PSX, as featured on this month's cover, has been split. Some appreciate its strict straight edges and sheer whiteness, while others have likened its appearance to something you might find in an especially posh kitchen. Either way, it provokes a reaction.

Looking under its bonnet reveals hardware that's not nearly as contentious. In fact, it's not really capable of anything that a selection of other pieces of technology combined could not, but that's precisely the point: buying a PSX will negate the need to have any other piece of entertainment kit (bar a display unit) in your home. Everything, from PS2 games to digital photos to DVD movies, will run through this Sony-badged machine. It is the mythical hub whose arrival technology analysts have for years been citing as the turning point in consumer electronics. It represents true convergence. And it's right here, right now. Or at least the Japanese version is, and this month we've been putting one through its paces. You can read our testers' findings on page 70, along with an extensive look at what convergence will mean for videogaming as a whole.

Convergence is also Microsoft's next goal, and the company's Xbox successor – which, if rumourmongers are to be believed, will be able to do everything from rendering seven zillion polygons per second to boiling an egg – falls within our look at the year ahead, which begins on page 82.

The videogame hardware scene is beginning to get all juicy again. And we're gearing up to bring you the best reporting available anywhere. Hold on tight.





Features













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Non-executive Chairman: Roger Parry
Chief Executive: Greg Ingham
Group Finance Director: John Bowman
Tel +44 1225 442244

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Editorial
Future Publishing 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
Edge Website www.edge-online.com

People on Edge
Tony Mott editor
Darren Phillips art editor
Sam Richards associate editor
Margaret Robertson games editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Ste Curran editor-at-large

Contributors
Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, Tim Edwards, Andrew Heavens, Steve Jarratt, Jon Jordan, David McCarthy, Toshihiro Nagoshi, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Neil Randall, RedEye, João Diniz-Sanches, Mark Sorrell, Mark Walbank, Steven Williams

Production
Kirsty Bell senior production coordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Colin Polis commercial buyer

Circulation
Russell Hughes circulation product manager
Jason Comber circulation manager

Advertising
Clare Williamson head of sales
Liz Dennys advertising manager
Scott Longstaff senior account manager
Andrew Church senior sales executive
Advertising phone 01225 442244

Publishing
James Binns publisher
Tamara Longden promotions manager
Simon Wear international licensing director
Robert Price group publishing director

Subscriptions & distribution
Future Publishing Ltd
FREEPOST BS4900, Somerton TA11 7BR
Telephone 01458 271184
Fax 01458 271146
Email games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
Distributed through the UK newstrade by **Sey**
Distribution, 86 Newman Street, London W1
Telephone 0207 907 6000
Can't find **Edge**? **James Greenwood** 01225

Senior management
Roger Parry non-executive chairman
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directory february

the 'that's not a console, is it?' issue



















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Testscreen

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News and views from e-entertainment's cutting edge



EA calls time on the gaming party

With 2003 now a fading memory, Edge takes a look back at the Christmas silly season – and finds the world's biggest thirdparty game publisher firmly in control

Attendance at the Christmas party is mandatory. Everyone's there, even the accounts department – who wouldn't so much as touch a drop of Jacob's Creek for the rest of year – drunk on two Bacardi Breezers and monopolising the dancefloor. The IT guys in borrowed suits and comedy ties are clogging up the bar, while the office juniors are throwing up in the cubicles. Attendance is mandatory, which is why is it's so crowded. But is anyone having any fun?

The videogame industry's annual Christmas party takes place on the shop shelves, where attendance is also mandatory. But with almost half of all 2003's software releases shoehorned into the period between October and Christmas, there just isn't room for everyone to enjoy themselves. The Christmas crush was more frenzied than ever last year, but with companies fighting for an ever smaller share of shelf space and magazine coverage, the big winners were contrasted with those who ended up with little more than a hangover for their troubles.

The Christmas period is obviously the crucial time of the year for videogame sales, but are publishers exacerbating the situation by scheduling all their big releases and allotting the majority of their marketing spend for the last three months of the year? Companies are gambling big on Christmas sales, and when the stakes are this high, there's bound to be fallout.





EA's *Need for Speed: Underground* became the surprise hit of the season, while THQ's *Finding Nemo* was one of the few games to break Electronic Arts' monopoly on the charts

"Christmas is about publishers releasing a portfolio of games – some licences, some franchises, some original. Each has its place"



You'd expect most publishers to be placing safe bets, with an unhealthy abundance of sequels and licensed products on show. Sure enough, EA's *Medal of Honor*, *Lord of the Rings* and *FIFA* franchises threatened to monopolise the party. But there were also a heartening handful of big hot originals among the serious unit shifters of 2003. *True Crime: Streets of LA* was a huge success for Activision, while Sony's *EyeToy: Play* and Bigben's *Dance UK* both demonstrated the growing importance of hands-free gaming – games which don't require joypads. It could even be argued that EA Chertsey and Dundee-based Visual Sciences' success in turning Harry Potter's favourite game Quidditch, a baffling and, in terms of its rule structure, almost incoherent hybrid of lacrosse, polo and flying, into a reasonable game demonstrates the cross-media skills of game development at their highest level.

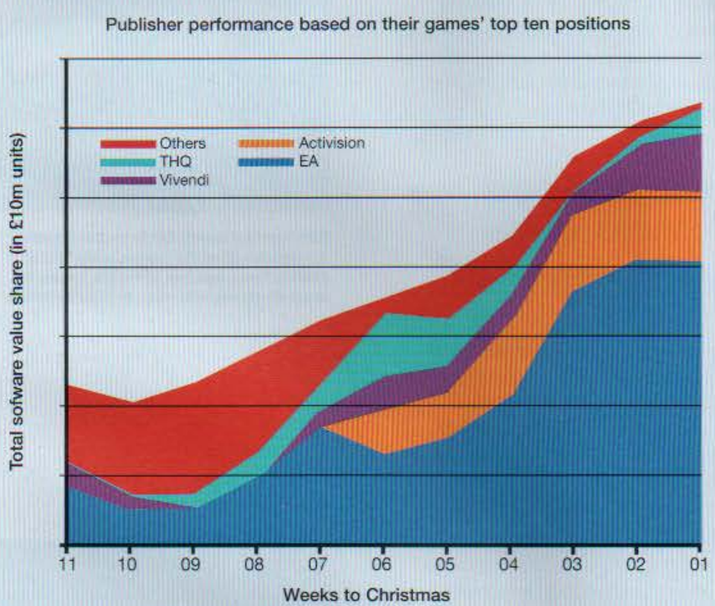
Meanwhile, more good news came from game brands such as *Tony Hawk's* and *Need for Speed*, which experienced successful makeovers. The only link for resulting hits *Tony Hawk's Underground* and *Need for Speed Underground* to their predecessors was the start of their names and their respective use of skateboard and car as means of transport. Another surprise Christmas success story, Vivendi Universal's

Top 20 selling games in the UK for 2003

01 *FIFA 2004* (EA)
02 *Need for Speed: Underground* (EA)
03 *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (EA)
04 *The Sims* (EA)
05 *GTA: Vice City* (Rockstar)
06 *Enter the Matrix* (Atari)
07 *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* (UbiSoft)
08 *EyeToy: Play* (Sony)
09 *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* - (Vivendi Universal/Fox)
10 *FIFA 2003* (EA)
11 *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (EA)
12 *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (EA)
13 *Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets* (EA)
14 *True Crime: Streets of LA* (Activision)
15 *The Getaway* (Sony)
16 *Championship Manager 4* (Eidos)
17 *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (EA)
18 *Pro Evolution Soccer 3* (Konami)
19 *James Bond 007: Nightfire* (EA)
20 *Crash Bandicoot: Wrath of Cortex* (Vivendi Universal)

Controlling Christmas

Proving the financial reasoning behind the Electronic Arts method, this graph demonstrates the increasing importance of chart positions the closer you get to Christmas. Back in October, EA's games account for about 40 per cent of the £20m weekly retail software market but this grows rapidly as December approaches. In mid-December, the size of the UK software market had tripled to over £60m, with EA now controlling around two thirds of it. In contrast, the share of publishers whose games aren't in the top positions has shrunk considerably. However, the relatively large areas controlled by Vivendi and THQ demonstrates the value of big hits; in this case *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* and *Finding Nemo* respectively. Activision also carves out a big chunk of cash for itself, thanks to the longevity of *True Crime* and *Tony Hawk's Underground* in the upper reaches of the chart during the crucial December game-buying frenzy.



Raw data sourced from ELSPA/ChartTrack & MCV Media





There's no originality left in the Christmas charts? The resounding success of Sony's *EyeToy: Play*, which has continued to sell in large numbers since its June release, suggests otherwise

The Simpsons: Hit & Run, made its mark by merging the gameplay of *GTA* within the family-friendly embrace of Homer and family.

Conclusion? Christmas is about publishers releasing a portfolio of games – some licences, some franchises, some original. Each has its place.

Good, better, best

"On one hand, we've been working hard to improve the quality of our yearly franchises such as *FIFA* and *Tiger Woods* but we're introducing new ones as well," explains EA UK's head of PR **Glen O'Connell**. "*FIFA 2004* was the biggest seller in the UK during 2003 and that's not because we just release it every year. There's been an internal push to make sure that game gets better and better every year."

ensure we're pushing the right products at the right time."

Indeed, with game sales in November and December accounting for well over a third of the UK's total software market during 2003, it's clear why publishers view as the crucial period. If they can't break a game at Christmas, they may as roll up the debts and get another career. Unfortunatel however, for the majority of publishers the strength of EA's line-up is slowly wiping them out. With the exception of Konami's *Pro Evolution 3*'s one week on top, EA games controlled the UK number one spot from October 4 onwards. But not only that the company also averaged three out of th top five games, four out of the top ten and six out of the top 20 throughout that entire period. It released 14 games – as well as

"Christmas is a key period, and while we don't ignore the rest of the year, we ensure we're pushing the right products at the right time"



EA is keen to spend time and money building the franchises of the future as well. *Need for Speed*, a brand that traditionally hasn't done well in Europe, has been revitalised, becoming the second biggest-selling game in the UK during 2003. And when combined with the dozen other top-20 hits the company racked up between October and December, it all added up to bumper Christmas for the world's largest game publisher.

"2002 was our most successful ever, but 2003 has been fantastic," O'Connell enthuses. "Christmas is obviously a key buying period for games, and while we don't ignore the rest of the year, we

co-publishing Namco's number one *Soul Calibur II* in Europe with Nintendo and distributing Vivendi Universal/Fox's *The Simpsons: Hit & Run*. Estimates suggest E accounted for over 40 per cent of the UK's total games sales during that period.

Taking into account the success of THQ's *Finding Nemo*, Vivendi's *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* and Activision's *Tony Hawk's Underground* and *True Crime*, and the remaining other 15-odd publishers ended up sharing a mere third of sales between them.

More games are released at Christmas than at any other time of the year. In one sense this doesn't matter as more games



No other publisher had the muscle to compete with Electronic Arts this yuletide, who claimed the Christmas number one with *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* while three of its other releases took up residence in the top five. Meanwhile, *FIFA 2004* was the biggest selling videogame of the year



The eight myths of Christmas 2003

Christmas myth 1: *Need for Speed Underground* was a surprise success only because 007: Everything or Nothing slipped.
The background: With publishers having to book their TV ads slots months in advance of Christmas, last-minute scheduling alterations can throw those well-laid plans into confusion.
The company line: There is some truth in this, although a spokesman for EA says the company had already decided to advertise *Need for Speed* on TV before *Bond* slipped. The resulting ad slot gaps were spread between it and other EA games. *Need for Speed* did get more focus with respect to in-store advertising, however, because of *Bond*'s absence.
Fact or fiction? A nice one for the conspiracy theorists but doesn't quite pan out in reality.

Christmas myth 2: UbiSoft's trio of original games *Prince of Persia*, *Beyond Good & Evil* and *XIII* were lost in the Christmas crush. The company was forced to discount the titles heavily to get them into retail channels.
The background: Launching original games is difficult at the best of times. Launching into the crowded Christmas market is expensive and not helped when your games involve a prince, a cel-shaded French comic hero and a girl with green lips.
The official line: *Beyond Good & Evil* clearly became lost in the rush, but UbiSoft is continuing to back the other two games and claims to be pleased with their performance, which improved after Christmas. "We've sold over 100,000 units of *Prince of Persia* in the UK," says one inside source, although admitting this did include PS2 bundling and other retail deals.
Fact or fiction? Is the glass half full or half empty? Bottomline: the games did okay, not great. And *Prince of Persia* is still be released on Xbox, PC and GameCube, as well.

Christmas myth 3: TV advertising is a big waste of money.
The background: With every publisher spending hundreds of thousands on TV slots, it doesn't make sense because consumers are swamped.
The official line: It's hard to make a general argument. While TV ads failed to shift any units of *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Ghost Hunter* or *Mission: Impossible: Operation Surma*, 2003 was the first time EA put *Tiger Wood PGA Tour* on the box. The 2004 version was the best selling version ever and the 24th highest selling game in 2003.
Fact or fiction? True in most cases, but when it works, it really works.

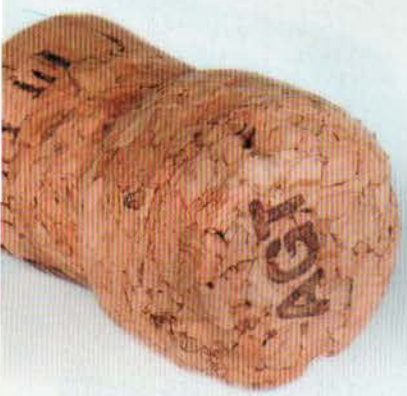
Christmas myth 4: Codemasters' *Pop Idol* was top of the flops.
The background: Despite being the bookies' early favourite for the Christmas number one spot, the highest chart position for Codemasters' *Pop Idol* game was a lowly 16. It failed to even make the top 20 during Christmas week.
The official line: A spokesman said the game had performed "to expectations" in the UK. He pointed out that the US version of the TV show has only recently started its new series. Codemasters has already released its *American Idol* game and will be ramping up its marketing push in that crucial market during the spring.
Fact or fiction? Certainly off to a bad start in the UK but the fat lady hasn't starting singing yet so don't rule out a happy ending.

Christmas myth 5: GameCube is now the number two console in the world following its price cut in 2003
The background: With the price down to £79 (99 in Europe, $99 in the US), GameCube sales rose sharply, with Nintendo claiming victory over Microsoft.
The official line: GameCube has probably outsold Xbox globally in 2003 (the final figures aren't yet available), but it's still neck-and-neck in terms of total installed base. What is worrying for the company however, is that key firstparty games such as *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!* and *Star Wars: Rebel Strike: Rogue Squadron 3* haven't sold well in Europe at all.
Fact or fiction? Who cares? You're still fighting over second place. Whatever happened to being number one?

Christmas myth 6: Beset by a lawsuit and late tweaks, Activision's *True Crime: Streets of LA* almost didn't make it in time for Christmas.
The background: Launching late into a crowded Christmas market might be suicidal for any original title, particularly when you're up against a *GTA* dual pack, but *True Crime* was Activision's big hope for 2003.
The official line: *True Crime* did slip two months from its original release date but the lawsuit from author Robert Crais was dropped after the game had been released. As for the last-minute polishing, a spokesman explains, "There's no point in releasing a game on time that won't live up to consumer expectations so we didn't ship it until we were happy with it."
Fact or fiction? A half truth, but all's well that ends well.

Christmas myth 7: It is official EA policy to have the top five games at Christmas.
The background: The Christmas top five is the most lucrative part of the year so the most aggressive, profitable games company in the world ensures no competitor will take what it regards as its rightful place.
The official line: "Christmas is obviously a huge period for us so we try to make sure we do as well as possible then, but I wouldn't go so far as to call it official policy," says an EA spokesman.
Fact or fiction? Whatever the truth, it's an area EA will have to work harder at in 2004. In 2002, *GTA: Vice City* and *The Getaway* spoilt its UK top five party. This year it was *The Simpson's: Hit & Run*.

Christmas myth 8: It's stupid for publishers to focus so much on the Christmas selling period.
The background: So many games are released in a two-month period that publishers have to spend hundred of thousands of pounds marketing titles to ensure they're visible. They would do much better to focus on the other ten months of the year.
The official line: The stark fact is that Christmas accounts for about half of the UK's annual sales and is the best time for publishers to release their big games. Success at Christmas ameliorates a game's earning potential significantly.
Fact or fiction? Some games are always lost in the end of year rush, but it's the only place to be for key brands.



are also sold at Christmas. The problem is there aren't enough extra sales to go round, particularly as the top titles suck up a disproportionate amount. Inevitably, some games don't do the expected numbers and, obviously, no publisher is going to confess to its own shortcomings, but a detailed study of the charts demonstrates the turkeys of Christmas 2003.

Notable by their absence from the charts were UbiSoft's *Beyond Good & Evil*, Rare's *Grabbed by the Ghoulies* and Sony's *Ghost Hunter*, all of which sank without trace. Archly known as *Mission: Invisible* in some circles, Atari's *Mission: Impossible: Operation Surma* also failed to make any impact, despite TV advertising, and is now being heavily discounted at retail, as is the publisher's only marginally more successful *Terminator 3*. Other games that charted only briefly included Sony's *Jak II* and *Ratchet & Clank 2* and Rockstar's *Manhunt*.

A more high-profile failure, however, was Codemasters' *Pop Idol*. Designated the bookies' favourite in an announcement by Ladbrokes and trade body ELSPA at the start of November, it failed to chart higher than its opening position of 16. **Richard Eddy**, Codemasters' head of communications, put on a brave face, claiming the game had "performed according to expectations," although he did point out that as the US TV show 'American Idol' has only recently started its new series there is potential for the game to do well there. Ironically for Ladbrokes and ELSPA, no odds were provided for the eventual Christmas number one, *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, which only goes to show how tricky predictions can be.

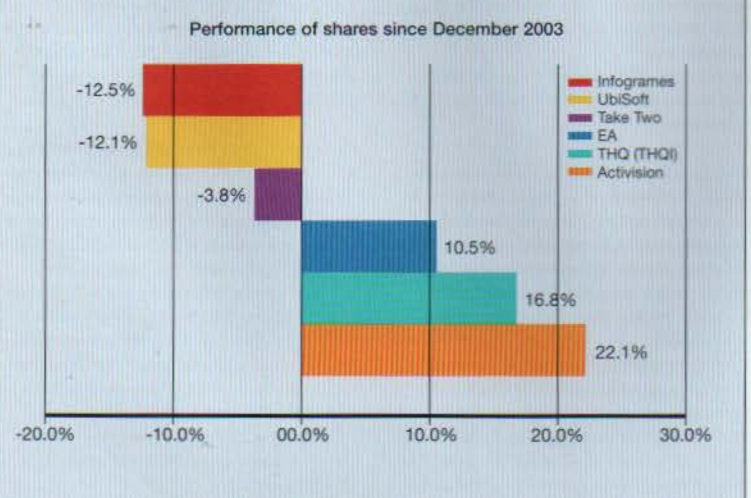
The status of UbiSoft's *Prince of Persia* and *XIII* are less clear cut, however. Despite reviewing well and being supported by hefty advertising spends, including TV spots, both games only started to sell well after Christmas, by which point their price had dropped from £40 to £30. *Prince of Persia* was also extensively bundled with PlayStation2, which would have considerably reduced the revenue UbiSoft generated from each sale. A similar story in the US has seen UbiSoft offering anyone who buys *Prince of Persia* a free copy of *Splinter Cell* throughout January. UbiSoft's head of consumer press, **Lidia Stojanovic**, says both games have done well in the UK, however, and the company was pleased with their performance.

She also refutes the suggestion that the games would have performed better if released during a quieter time of the year. "Christmas is the highest-selling part of the year and you release the games you think will do well then," she says, pointing out that publishers can't shift releases randomly. "In the first quarter of 2004 we're releasing *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*, *Rainbow Six 3* for PS2 and *Far Cry*."

"No odds were provided for the eventual Christmas number one, MoH: Rising Sun, which only goes to show how tricky predictions can be"

Share of the spoils

As well having a direct impact on the revenues and profits a publisher generates, rumours about the strength of Christmas sales can have a big impact on a company's share price too. The performance of *True Crime* and *Tony Hawk's Underground* has clearly been recognised by investors with Activision shares up 22 per cent since December. Other Christmas winners, such as THQ and EA, have also basked in solid improvements in their share prices. Conversely a weak showing can have a detrimental effect with investors assuming a bad Christmas will result in weaker than expected final year earnings. Take Two is only down slightly. With no new *GTA* game, it was looking to *Manhunt*, *Max Payne 2* and *Hidden & Dangerous 2* to pick up the slack, but none did particularly better than expected. Ubisoft and Atari/Infogrames have suffered however. Both companies are down over ten per cent as games such as *Mission: Impossible: Operation Surma*, *Beyond Good & Evil* and *Prince of Persia* failed to live up to expectations.





UbiSoft's release of *Prince of Persia* in the crowded Christmas period was certainly viewed as a risk by most industry observers. Sales held up respectably, although discounting in some chains played its part





Sony's *Ghost Hunter* and Microsoft's *Grabbed by the Ghoulies* were two higher-profile games that got buried in the Christmas deluge

she says. Meanwhile, the company will get another attempt to make *Prince of Persia* a success when the Xbox, GameCube and PC versions are released here in March.

With the exception of EA, the big winner of Christmas 2003 was Activision. After a terrible couple of years as sales of big franchises such as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* and *Star Trek* collapsed, the success of *Spider-Man: The Movie* proved to be a turning point. The company focused on developing fewer, higher-quality games. Revitalising the Tony Hawk brand was a key task, although the initial reaction to the inclusion of *GTA*-esque gameplay to the franchise didn't go down well. Equally, *True Crime: Streets of LA* – a game whose genesis as the lovechild of *GTA* and *The Getaway* eventually became its major selling point – looked to be an unlikely winner.

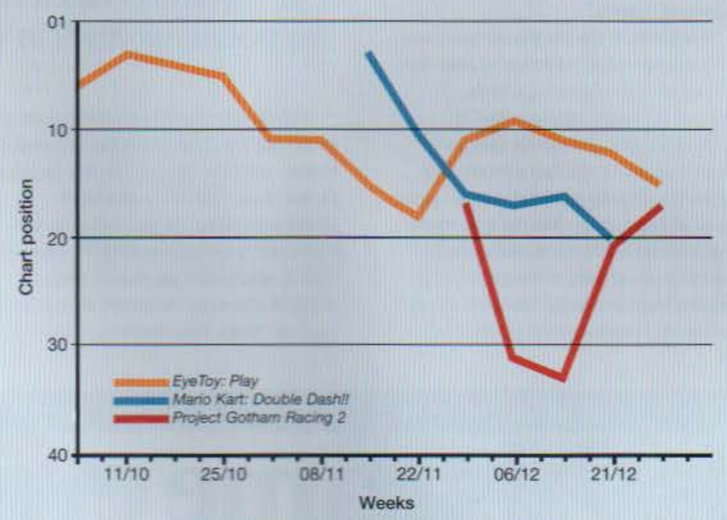
"We had a great deal of quiet confidence before Christmas, but consumer response was better than expected," says Activision spokesman **Tim Ponting**. In fact, so good has been the performance of both games that after US sales figures from November were released (603,000 units for *True Crime* and 554,000 units for *Tony Hawk's Underground*), Activision's share price jumped sharply ending December up 22 per cent, as the company predicted record financial figures for the year.

Which just goes to show why the Christmas market is so important for publishers. Despite the competition, it really is worth the risk. But don't be fooled into thinking that anyone really knows how to manage success and failure. A lot of it is about being in the right place at the right time with the right marketing campaign.

We shouldn't be too surprised that the Christmas market gets hijacked by sequels and licences. After all, this is the time of year when publishers aren't really aiming at us, but at less-informed customers shopping for presents. Any company braving the frenzy with a less obviously commercial product (hello, UbiSoft) should really think about hibernating until spring. But with the rewards so great, it seems the temptation of untold riches is too difficult for most to resist. We might be feeling the hangover now, but this time next year, we'll all be back at the bar with a vengeance.

The big three

None of the hardware manufacturers had a particularly great Christmas in terms of pure software sales. Sony's *EyeToy: Play* (a hardware/software hybrid) underlined its status as the success story of 2003, however, continuing to maintain a strong chart position throughout the Christmas period. Other big firstparty games such as *Jak II: Renegade*, *Ratchet & Clank 2*, *Ghost Hunter*, *World Championship Rally 3* and *A Dog's Life* failed to make any impression. 2003 has generally been a good year for Nintendo, at least in terms of a rapidly growing GameCube installed base, but *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!* didn't hang around long in the charts, while *Star Wars: Rebel Strike: Rogue Squadron 3* performed terribly. Microsoft had little to cheer either: Despite a huge amount of TV advertising, *Project Gotham Racing 2* couldn't compete with the big multi-console titles, while the performance of the first fruits of its expensive Rare purchase, *Grabbed by the Ghoulies*, looks to be an apt description for the Redmond exec who agreed the $375m (£203m) asking price.



Size of our cow

As expected, the UK games market grew in 2003, with software sales up 7.1 per cent to £1.26 billion. This should only be expected at this stage of the console cycle, however, as the total number of consoles in the UK has increased in 2003. With neither Sony nor Microsoft cutting the standalone price of their consoles during the year, PlayStation2 and Xbox sales were down compared to last year. Both companies currently prefer to bundle games and other peripherals with their console to maintain profit margins resulting in total console sales in December dropping about ten per cent compared with the same period last year. The combined total of the UK hardware and software markets remains over £2 billion.

With price cuts to PlayStation2 and Xbox now expected during 2004, it seems likely that this year will be the peak of this console cycle. Around half of PSone sales were generated when it was priced at £99, a fact emphasised by Chris Deering, now installed as president of Sony Europe. He claims there will be a PAL PlayStation2 installed base of around 22m by the end of March 2004, a figure he expects to double during the console's lifetime.



Videogame violence returns to the agenda

It's Manhunt versus 'The Mail On Sunday' as Rockstar comes under fire from a typically hysterical mass media

Mr Game Psychology: Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University



The past month has been a difficult one for Rockstar Games, which has found itself at the centre of a flurry of allegations directed variously at *Manhunt*, *GTA: Vice City*, and even the authenticity of Rockstar North's claim on the idea behind the *Grand Theft Auto* games. The charge was inevitably led in this country by reactionary organ 'The Mail On Sunday', which ran a histrionic article denouncing *Manhunt* for its violent content. In turn, this inspired several other media outlets to pick up on the issue of violence in videogames, with varying degrees of hysteria.

Meanwhile, in the US, the company was being denounced by the mayor of New York and various civil rights groups for its depiction of Haitian gangs in *Vice City*.

The timing of 'The Mail On Sunday' *Manhunt* piece – more than a month after the game's relatively subdued launch – gave rise to wild speculation that the story might have been placed by the publisher itself in order to drum up sales of the game. In fact, Rockstar has consistently refused to chase controversy outside of the content of its games themselves, and offered "no comment" responses to accusative newspaper stories, knowing that agendas were already set against them.

This unfavourable publicity for *Manhunt* arrives hot on the heels of the decision by New Zealand's Office of Film and Literature Classification to ban the game from sale or rent in the country.

Additionally, there's a suit being pursued by the Anti-Defamation League, on behalf of Haitian civil rights groups, claiming damages for the *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*'s depiction of Haitian gangs. This case was prompted by a news report on TV channel CBS 2, which drew attention to lines of dialogue uttered by characters in the game such as, "I hate these Haitians, I'm gonna kill me a Haitian." Even New York's mayor Michael Bloomberg got involved, though he suspended a threatened investigation into whether *GTA: Vice City* violated any of the city's human rights laws after Rockstar agreed to eliminate the offending dialogue from future versions of the game. An official statement read: "We empathise with the concerns of the Haitian community and we are giving serious consideration to them. Some statements made by fictional characters in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* have been taken out of context. There was no intention to offend any ethnic group and we take these claims very seriously."

Just as damaging, however, has been the media's reporting of this case. One particularly disproportionate article, in the

> "The timing gave rise to wild speculation that the story might have been placed by the publisher itself in order to drum up sales"

Hey, that was my idea

A problem of an entirely different nature currently faces Rockstar in the UK courts. A Scottish IT consultant is bringing a £1.5m claim against the company, alleging that the inspiration for the original *GTA* was his. Mark Gallagher claims that DMA Design, now Rockstar North, based the original 2D title on a prototype game called *Crime Inc*, featuring gang warfare in an urban environment. He asserts that he presented the game during a job interview with the company in 1993, leaving a copy with the company which was never returned. Rockstar denies any such occurrence.



'Horrific' PlayStation video banned by overseas censor goes on sale to British teens

Is this game even sicker than Grand Theft Auto?

By Matt Nixson

HOODED murderers decapitate victims with machetes in a horrifying new computer game branded sick by children's campaigners, politicians and psychologists.

Players butcher opponents, suffocate them with plastic bags, strangle them with cheesewire or kill them in cold blood using a chainsaw or double-barrelled shotgun.

Manhunt – developed by the British company behind Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, dubbed the most violent game ever – has been banned in New Zealand. But there are no plans to censor the game, made for PlayStation 2, here despite a growing clamour.

The game features death row prisoner James Earl Cash, freed from jail to go on a murderous spree for an ultra-violent reality TV show.

One British retailer said: 'Manhunt is the benchmark by which all video game violence will be measured. It is horrific.' Players gain points by directing Cash to kill in increasingly brutal ways with different weapons.

New Zealand censor Bill Hastings, who banned Manhunt last month, said: 'To succeed a player must learn to tolerate or even enjoy the violence he or she inflicts.'

At the climax of the game – given an 18 certificate here – Cash kills a man by cutting open his stomach with a chainsaw, then saws off his head and stabs him in the back.

Tory ex-Home Office Minister Ann Widdecombe said: 'It is a shame children in New Zealand have more protection than youngsters here.'

Manhunt's creator, Rockstar Games, was founded by Sam Houser and Terry Donovan, son of Sixties photographer Terence Donovan, who met at school in London. They have become multi-millionaires selling increasingly violent games courting controversy worldwide. Vice City, the fourth in the Grand Theft Auto series, has sold 12 million copies.

Manhunt, released here before Christmas, is expected to replicate the success through word of mouth. Shops expect a flood of parents buying Manhunt for their teenagers without knowing what it contains.

Megan Bruns, of children's charity Kidscape, said: 'Youngsters will see themselves rewarded for violent behaviour without a thought for the moral implications of killing.'

Professor Mark Griffiths, of Nottingham Trent University, said: 'Research has shown that kids most likely to be affected by these games – juvenile delinquents or children with behavioural problems – are most likely to be attracted by them.'

John Beyer, of Mediawatch UK, said: 'Censors have no understanding of the consequences of games like this.'

Last night Rockstar Games, which has previously insisted that its games are geared towards more mature audiences, was unavailable for comment.

DISTURBING: Scenes of bloodshed and torture from Manhunt, which has been banned in New Zealand

'New York Post', advised investors to sell shares in Rockstar's parent company, Take Two Interactive. Characterised by grotesque overstatement, the piece declared of *GTA*: "This is 10,000 times worse than the worst thing anybody thinks Michael Jackson ever did to a little boy… the fact that the game supposedly can't be sold to anyone under 17 years of age is completely irrelevant and changes nothing." Continuing in the same tone, the piece went on to compare the company's games to child pornography, cock fighting and dwarf throwing.

This was a sign of things to come in the UK. Gary Younge's erroneous claim in 'The Guardian' that *Vice City* awarded "extra points for killing Haitians" was just a taster for the overstated indignance of 'The Mail On Sunday'. The strapline – "'Horrific' PlayStation video banned by overseas censor goes on sale to British teens" – was rather misleading, given that the sale of *Manhunt* in this country is legally restricted by its BBFC rating of '18', and was followed by a predictably polemic argument that the game is set to deprave Britain's youths.

Mark Griffiths, a chartered psychologist at Nottingham Trent University, who was quoted in the piece, appeared to condemn the game, though was at pains to stress to **Edge** that his views were misrepresented: "I gave an interview to 'The Mail On Sunday' that lasted 15 minutes and was very balanced, but they took one line that wasn't even right."

Nevertheless, the article drummed up enough interest to warrant further discussion on 'Radio Five Live' and in other newspapers during the following week. Indeed, there is a serious concern underlying 'The Mail's' blanket condemnation of the game: research does show that very young children can be affected by the violence that they see in videogames. But it's clear that Rockstar's titles are not intended for consumption by the very young, and Griffiths is keen to adopt a balanced view. "You're never going to stop the 15, 16, 17-year-olds playing it, but age restriction should rule out very young children, up the age of 11 or 12. It's quite obvious that if you or I sat and played *Manhunt* all day every day, it's not going to change how we view the world. But for those who haven't had their moral development fully formed or their social or cognitive thinking fully formed, they may get ideas about the world from those games and the media that they interact with."

A large part of the problem that arises when the media chooses to create a moral panic around the issue of videogame violence is that the research undertaken into the effects on people of playing videogames has produced inconclusive results – partly because of methodological inadequacies: "A lot of it consists of cross-sectional studies, looking at one group of individuals in one snapshot in time," explains Griffiths. "Even if you can show an effect afterwards, it might only be a short-term effect or, alternatively, because we've got no longitudinal research [which examines the impact on individuals over a number of years], it may be that although there's no short-term effect, there may be a residual build-up effect."

The bottom line is that there's very little that can be done about irresponsible journalism. "I've seen it happen before," continues Griffiths. "I've done research on videogame addiction, pointing out that it only happens to a minority of players, but the headline in the 'Mail' was 'Joystick Junkies'. This year I've written lots of articles about the therapeutic and educational benefits of videogames, yet one quote can still suggest that I'm slamming them."

"I actually think the advantages of playing videogames far outweigh the negative effects," he concludes, "and all those negative effects come from very, very excessive play, and it's a small minority that are engaged in that kind of behaviour."



Despite the outcry, Edge can't help but feel that *Manhunt* lets the player off lightly. The violence is brief and often veiled compared to the detail of a truly realistic recreation of brutal killings





It's hardly surprising that the real maturity of *Manhunt* – the way it plays with videogaming convention and magpies movie commonplaces – didn't make it into the 'Mail on Sunday' article

Rockstar classics

In related Rockstar news, the company has recently made some of its back catalogue available for free download under the Rockstar Classics label. The range currently includes two classic Rockstar North titles: *Wild Metal* and the original *Grand Theft Auto*. Both games have been optimised for current PC hardware, and are available to download from www.rockstargames.com/classics/





It will be interesting to see if Rockstar chooses to scale back the lawlessness of future *GTA* games in order to forestall the type of criticism it currently has to face

CES marks new chapter for PC-based consoles

American consumer electronics event steals march on E3 by playing host to two new console unveilings



Apex and VIA's ApeXtreme console comes in two flavours and comes with a full version of Windows XP embedded



Sony's PSX (above) is leading the way for all-in-one units. Infinium's machine certainly can't compete with its looks

The concept of putting mainstream PC hardware into a console-shaped box has been mooted for years and, while Microsoft practically did it with Xbox, it still employs a proprietary OS and remains platform-dependant. However, at January's Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show two separate projects were unveiled, both offering massmarket PC gaming at a fraction of the cost of a fully-fledged PC. VIA Technologies Inc and Apex Digital unveiled the unfortunately-named ApeXtreme, while Infinium labs finally pulled the covers off its wretchedly overdesigned Phantom PC.

The ApeXtreme PC Gaming Console is a joint venture between VIA, a Taiwanese microprocessor developer, and Apex Digital, a California-based cut-price CE manufacturer, which promotes itself as the fastest-growing consumer electronics company in history (in just three years it has become the number-one seller of DVD players in the US). VIA supplies the silicon expertise, while Apex provides the muscle to get the product under the noses of the American public.

ApeXtreme is based on the VIA Glory Personal Gaming Console Platform, which brings together a number of VIA's own technologies into a fully-featured multimedia device. The system is powered by a 1.4GHz x86-compatible C3 processor, partnered by a CN400 Digital Media Chipset that incorporates the graphics processing unit (GPU), MPEG2 and MPEG4 playback, TV tuner, Gigabit Ethernet, six-channel audio and a range of multimedia connectivity, including six USB 2.0 ports.

The GPU – an S3 Graphics DeltaChrome – is a powerful DirectX 9 compatible unit (pixel/vertex shader 2.0+), with an eight-pixel render pipeline running at a fill rate of 2.4 gigapixels-per-second, and which supports gaming at HDTV resolutions. The system also includes a 20Gb hard drive and 256Mb of DDR RAM, while an 'instant-on' embedded version of Windows XP with Media Player 9 provides the front-end.



The long-awaited Phantom PC console lives up to the phrase 'PC in a box' by offering a choice of processors and hard drives. It will be reliant on broadband for content delivery

The provision of a full Windows OS means that the ApeXtreme can act as an audio/video jukebox, providing video playback of DVD, VCD, DiVX and WMA files, plus audio playback of most popular digital formats, from either the optical drive, hard drive or via streaming media. And, of course, it has access to a massive range of existing PC software which, presumably, isn't just limited to games.

There are two systems on offer costing \$299 (£160) or \$399 (£215), with the cheaper model utilising an integrated UniChrome graphics core. This seems a strange choice, as this chip's graphics performance is no doubt underwhelming, and could lead to consumer confusion unless marketed appropriately.

Despite this ill-advised two-tier approach, initial impressions are that, if the ApeXtreme delivers on its promise, it will be something of a bargain. While it currently lacks the hard drive recording functionality of Sony's PSX (see page 70) it fulfils all other AV duties, including DVD recording, and if Apex can get the unit in front of enough customers with the right message, it may well stand some chance of survival.

Phantom hardware

Elsewhere on the show floor, the long-awaited (and conspiracy-theorist hoax) Phantom PC was finally revealed. Developed by Infinium Labs of Florida, the system ignores the home entertainment slant in favour of a focus on games: 'Built b Gamers for Gamers', it claims.

Uniquely, the Phantom is totally reliant on an 'always-on' broadband connection. It's closely supported by the PhantomNet Game Service, which provides games on demand, game rentals and seamless upgrades over a secure distribution network. It also comes bundled with a rang of games preinstalled on the hard drive – a many as 50, according to David Frederick, Infinium's chief marketing officer.

The lack of an optical drive negates an aspirations to be anything other than a games machine, although it's arguable that future iterations may not even need removable media, instead delivering pay-per-play audio and video as downloadable or streamed content.

Worryingly, the product sheet promises that it can be: "Configured to be the fastest most powerful console on the market." Infinium's website suggests a choice of AMD processors up to the XP3200+, up to 1GB DDR RAM, and a range of hard drives up to 320GB. However, there's only the single option of an NVidia NV36 (GeForce FX 5700) graphics card. The motherboard i a custom N-Force 2 Ultra 400 running an embedded version of Windows XP.

This 'build-to-order' concept, where consumers are allowed to specify their own machine, throws the whole ethos of a one-box solution into confusion. The Phantom i also billed as 'upgradeable,' though quite how you'd go about that isn't clear.

The logic of a permanently-connected, always-on terminal is solid, but with the size of modern PC games and today's meagre broadband speeds, it may be that the Phantom concept is just slightly ahead of its time.



Nottingham game festival prepares for action

Eclectic Screenplay festival builds most ambitious plan yet, with promises of EyeToy performances, Warhammer and more besides

Now in its fourth year, the 2004 Screenplay festival will take place on February 28-29 at Nottingham's Broadway Cinema. Organised in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University Digital Research Unit, the festival takes in retro reminiscences, game tournaments and art performances.

Previous events have brought together a unique mix of game-makers, academics, artists and players.

As part of the varied programme on offer, there will be interviews with Climax programmers and a chance to preview the delights of *Warhammer Online*, plus web-streamed Desert Island Games sessions with industry luminaries. The giant screen will host the final of the knockout E-Games Tournament, as well as showing game-related films. There will also be trials of new performance pieces based around the capabilities of EyeToy, and a display by the what-it-says-on-the-tin House Gymnastics team. As well as retro and arcade classics to play, there'll also be a night of classic 8-bit disco mixing.

Central to this year's festival is the Regain the Game competition, which encourages game designers to submit any piece of software which rethinks videogames. The completion has no rules, beyond defining a game as something you can finish or play perpetually, and a computer as a PC, console or anything in your attic. Closing date is January 30.

See www.broadway.org.uk or contact Rasheeqa Ahmad on 0115 952 6600 for more details.





An intriguing mix of retro and modern, games and films, music and gymnastics, Nottingham's Screenplay festival aims to discuss videogames 'in the context of cinema and media'

CUTTINGS



PSP given price clarification...

In an interview with 'MCV', Chris Deering (recently promoted to Sony of Europe's president), has indicated that the European price for the PSP should be closer to £200 than £300. The hope is that, even at this fairly modest price point, the PSP can generate profit from hardware sales alone. This should allow Sony to reduce the charges on software developers, making the PSP an attractive and flexible platform, which in turn should allow it to appeal to a wider range of consumers.

All in all, Sony is lining up a heavy list of question marks for itself. Can it really produce a machine as fully-featured as promised, for a price both low and profitable, in time for Christmas 2004 and with enough units to orchestrate a global launch? It'll be one of its tallest orders to date.

...and games too

The 'big six' Japanese thirdparty publishers recently confirmed they all have games in development for PSP. Namco and Konami have committed to providing at least one game each for Sony's handheld machine at launch, while Sega and Koei are planning to reveal the fruits of their PSP labours at the Tokyo Game Show in the Autumn. Capcom also intends to release a PSP title at launch, although the company has been critical of the process required to develop for the console. Square Enix is prevaricating, but it will be a surprise if it decides not to bring the *Final Fantasy* series to PSP. It's also currently rumoured that EA is recruiting 150 people for its PSP development team in Vancouver. If true, the mainstream muscle of a combined Sony and EA attack will be formidable.

Recently reviewed

A rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Castlevania Lament of Innocence	PlayStation2	Konami	In-house (KCET)	8
Manhunt	PlayStation2	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	8
Final Fantasy x-2	PlayStation2	Square Enix	In-house	7
Gotcha Force	GameCube	Capcom	In-house (Studio 1)	3
Mario and Luigi: Superstar Saga	Game Boy Advance	AlphaDream	Nintendo	8
Ghosthunter	PlayStation2	SCEE	In-house (Studio Cambridge)	5
Dog's Life	PlayStation2	SCEE	Frontier Developments	5
EyeToy: Groove	PlayStation2	SCEE	In-house	7
In Memoriam	PC, Mac	Ubisoft	Lexis Numérique	7
Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne	PC, Xbox, PS2	Rockstar Games	Remedy	6
Monster Rancher 4	PlayStation2	Tecmo	In-house	4
Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town	Game Boy Advance	Natsume	In-house	8
Legacy of Kain: Defiance	PS2, PC, Xbox	Eidos	Crystal Dynamics	4
Dance Dance Revolution Extreme	PlayStation2	Konami	In-house	8
Transformers Tataki	PlayStation2	Takara	Winkysoft	2
Chou-jikuu Yousai Macross	PlayStation2	Bandai	Sega-AM2	8
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	Xbox, PS2, GC, PC	Konami	In-house (KCEJ)	4
Mario Party 5	GameCube	Nintendo	Hudson	5
Top Spin	Xbox	Microsoft Game Studios	Power and Magic	8
Counter-Strike	Xbox	Microsoft Game Studios	Ritual/Valve	7
Bomberman Jetters	Game Boy Advance	Hudson	In-house	2
Arx Fatalis	Xbox	DreamCatcher Games	Arkane Studios	4



Castlevania LoI



Mario and Luigi



Manhunt



Max Payne 2



www.gdconf.com
www.seriousgames.org

Time to get Serious

The Game Developers Conference 2004 promises to be more than just fun, thanks to the inaugural Serious Games Summit



GDC04 highlights

Jason Rubin et al, Naughty Dog, 'Interfacing with Hollywood: Challenges and Opportunities'

Randy Smith, Ion Storm, 'Would the Real Emergent Gameplay Please Stand Up?'

Casey Hudson, Bioware, 'The Light and Dark Side of Creating a Monster RPG: Production Issues on *Star Wars: KOTOR*'

Julien Merceron, UbiSoft, 'The Impact of Middleware Technologies on Your Game Development'

Jamie Fristrom et al, Treyarch, 'From Spidey to Spidey 2: Using a Preproduction Phase To Innovate While Managing Risk'

Michael Booth, Turtle Rock Studios, 'The Making of the Official *Counter-Strike* Bot'

Allan Murphy et al, Blue 52, 'Building an Integrated Asset Management System in 17 Easy Stages'

Julien Bares et al, UbiSoft, 'The Art of *XIII*'

Seth Luisi, SCEA, 'SOCOM II: Creating a Compelling Online Console Game'

Eric Kraber, EA, 'Audio in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*'

Dev Madden, SuckerPunch Productions, 'Visualising Sly Cooper'

Another March in San Jose, another Game Developers Conference. But while GDC04 is bound to be the usual steaming rumour mill of the whats, whys and wherefores of the next round of console hardware, the formal schedule of the five-day conference promises more weighty discussions as well. Most notable is the introduction of the Serious Games Summit. This two-day event, spun out of the previous academic track, brings together those who are interested in using gaming technology for non-entertainment purposes. It has been organised by the International Game Developers Association and the Serious Games Initiative, a think-tank set up to focus on the usefulness of games in exploring the management and leadership challenges facing the US public sector with respect to education, training, health and public policy.

Ben Sawyer, co-leader of the Serious Games Initiative, says the summit is designed to address many different areas, ranging from professional developers who want to explore this emerging market, to educators looking at new ways to utilise game technologies as well as representatives from corporations, government and non-government organisations who are looking to fund and utilise game projects to advance their specific needs.

"I think people will be very surprised at the range of applications that have been developed in this area," Sawyer enthuses. "We've collected a number of products, including one for building homes and another that helps people overcome phobias. The range of budgets, production values, content and time-to-build is amazing. I think when developers see the opportunities they'll find a lot to be excited about."



Held in San Jose, California, between 22-26 March, Game Developers Conference 2004 promises to be the usual mixture of socialising, learning and gossiping, while the inaugural Serious Games Summit hopes to demonstrate the wider opportunities available for game developers



Ed Fries, Microsoft's corporate vice president of game publishing, is one of the great and good who will be sharing their wisdom at GDC04

One particular success story in this area has been the US army's *America's Army* game. Developed as a recruitment tool, almost 20 per cent of new cadets at the West Point officer training academy had played the game. And all this for 0.3 percent of the US army's annual advertising budget.

Sawyer is keen to point out less violent examples of serious games too. One is *Incident Commander*, developed for the Justice Department by Breakaway Games, it helps municipalities and county governments simulate virtual incidents like a chlorine gas leak. "Disaster drills are expensive to do and many localities can't afford them," explains Sawyer. "*Incident Commander* lets you simulate things that are hard to do in real life. Think of it as being like *Sim City*'s disaster mode on steroids."

Meanwhile, the main track of GDC keynote speakers in 2004 is also looking impressive. Id Software's John Carmack will be taking time out from *Doom 3* duties to give the main programming talk, while Microsoft game publishing head honcho Ed Fries leads the business side.

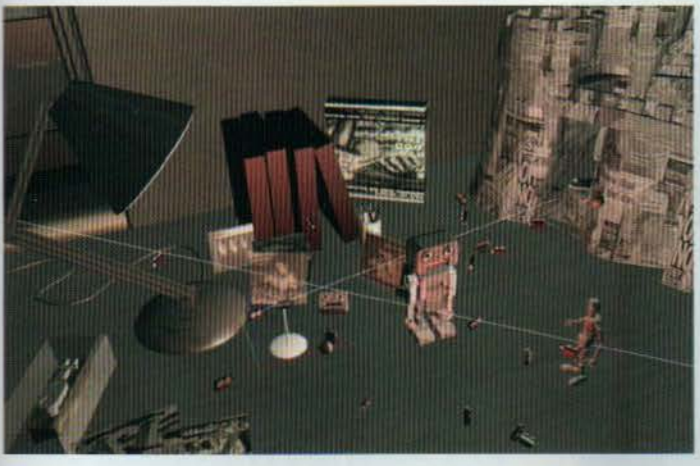


Elsewhere, Shiny's David Perry will be sharing the pain of *Enter The Matrix* as production keynote, and EA's exec in charge of production, Neil Young, gives the game design keynote on the subject of *LOTR: The Return of the King*. Other notables include old favourites such as Warren Spector, Will Wright, Tetsuya Mizuguchi and Tim Schafer.

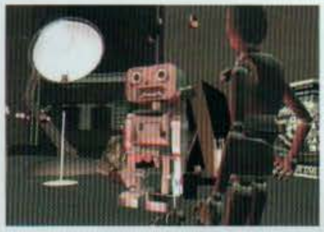
www.kelseus.com

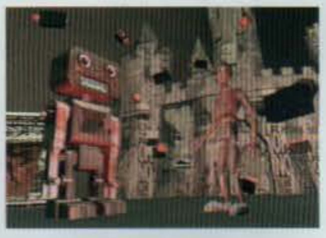
Striking the pose

Kelseus' realtime animation package Antics promises a new way to work



This demo of Antics shows the flexibility of the camera choreography as well as the OpenGL v1.4 renderer, although users can also output via offline thirdparty renderers





Let us paint a picture: macro-economic effects such as the cheapness of south-east Asian labour, combined with the tight control of intellectual properties and royalties by license holders, are squeezing the margins of many work-for-hire studios. Sound familiar? Such factors have pushed plenty of game developers over the edge during 2003, but much the same has happened with TV and film animation companies too.

"Just the other week, I was talking to the head of an animation studio that had closed. He was thinking about starting up again, but now he needs to be in control of the process," explains **Richard Jones**, MD of Cambridge-based animation tools company Kelseus. The lesson learned is that to prosper in this brave new world, studios are going to have to work smarter.

Which brings us neatly on to Kelseus' new animation tool, Antics.

"Antics is all about animating in real time," says Jones. "It's about breaking this weird way of working which means that the further a project progresses, the harder things become to change. IBM used to say it costs you a cent to make changes on paper, ten cents to do it in a meeting but by the time you're building the product, it's $10million. Antics is about having the flexibility to actually change things."

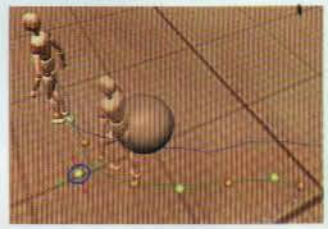
Simply put, Antics is a framework approach in which characters, props, geometry and animations can be quickly chained together and iterated through to create high-quality content. One of the key aspects is the way Antics handles the basic interaction between avatars and the props. In contrast to the approach of most packages, in which each individual prop is hardwired to an avatar, in Antics intelligence is associated with the props. For example, a bottle will contain the animation information required for any avatar to pick it up and will retarget this depending on the scale of the avatar. Similarly, stairs will tell any avatar how they should be climbed.

"Imagine you're playing a MMOG that's running Antics," Jones explains. "When you introduce a new object into the game, the object itself will tell the avatars how to get into the right position to say, hold it, instead of having to reprogram them. Once that's happened, the object becomes dynamically attached to the avatar and the system's underlying kinematics system takes over."

Actually, this particular example is some time off, as the first version of Antics, to be released this month, will be an offline animation tool only. The planned Antics gaming SDK will follow later. Jones argues that version one of Antics could be the difference between success and failure for some animation houses. "What we're offering is flexibility rather than having to plan your work in detail. If you have a few ideas, you can test them out and show people what's going on. Antics is about overcoming the way animation tools have driven the industry. We're offering a different way of working."

Antics: the details

Labelled a behaviourally driven, realtime 3D animation system by Kelseus, Antics is a multi-faceted package. Underpinning its features is a simple scripting language, which is backed up via a Python frontend. Generally controlled by sophisticated pathfinding algorithms, the avatars themselves can be controlled directly via keyboard and mouse in either third or firstperson views as well. These animations can then be recorded and edited within Antics' Trackview tool before being saved out. Antics also contains a procedural kinematics system which automatically handles the way avatars interact with physical objects. Another interesting feature is the ability to set up communication channels between avatars, so the animator can script interactions. Currently shipping with an import/export pipeline to Discreet's 3DS max, support for other packages will be added after launch.



Antics contains a sophisticated pathfinding algorithm, which enables the avatars to navigate their way through scenes without bumping into objects



Alternatively, animators can directly control the avatars through a scene, recording their movement for future use



One of the neat features available via Antics' scripting language GUI is the ability to set up communication channels between avatars, which enables animators to create relatively complex scenes, such as this bar setup



In this scene, each of the avatars is trying to catch the barman's eye, but he only looks up after completing a sequence of idle animations. The result is a random outcome

OUT THERE
REPORTAGE





Penny Arcade's campaign was such a success that hired haulage had to be brought in to ferry the goods



GameCubes and Lego – well, what presents would *you* suggest to put smiles on underprivileged kids faces?







It may all have been a little too much for Nintendo when it was first made, but now the Gianas are coming to PC

01 Substantially more than a penny

US: Some people love 'Penny Arcade', the tri-weekly internet comic strip which dissects gaming's issues du jour with pithy humour and italicised swearing. Some people don't like it so much, but that doesn't really matter, because even the most ardent haters won't be able to find fault with their Christmas project. Child's Play, in which readers of the comic were encouraged to donate toys from an Amazon wishlist to the Seattle Children's Hospital, provides an eloquent and easily-linked response to just about every negative newspaper article about videogaming in 2003. The total cost of toys donated at the time of writing exceeds $70,000, and that, along with a cheque for just under $30,000, created a serious amount of seasonal cheer amongst some of those who needed it the most. We wonder if some of gaming's bigger players couldn't take a leaf from the site's book when it comes to creating goodwill amongst all men? Go on, just mark it in the budget as 'misc. positive PR' – it sure beats spending cash on promo T-shirts no one will ever wear. Read more, and see more pictures of Gabe and Tycho's heartwarming adventures, at www.penny-arcade.com

02 Sisters do it for themselves

Germany: Younger readers may not remember *The Great Giana Sisters*, a homage to *Super Mario Bros* developed for the C64, Amiga and Atari ST, but then withdrawn by publisher Rainbow Arts under threat of legal action from Nintendo.

As ever, emulation = education, but those faint-hearted gamers scared off by primitive graphics should check out *Giana's Return*, a platform game for modern PCs based on the forbidden classic. With five worlds and 30 levels, it promises to be heavy on ancient platforming action, and – hopefully – light on Nintendo litigation. By the time you read this there may be something to download from the official site. If not, casual Googling will reveal at least two other remakes from the last few years (including a bizarre multiplayer version), so do feel free to infringe intellectual property while-u-wait. Head to www.gianas-return.de

Soundbytes

"The golden age of movies is gone...What they do today to survive is they multiply the special effects to catch up with what the kids want, because they've seen it in the incredible universes of these videogames."
Bruno Bonnell declares war on film.

"I exchanged the equipment with my labour, time, wisdom and money, and of course they are my belongings".
Li Hongchen takes the creators of popular Chinese online RTS Red Moon to court over stolen property. And wins.

"i had a wonderful house with slaves..yes slaves..my sister roxy was a wimp but i was much more strict. [i] had a different bunch every week. some were chicken heads and ran out... you get the guys in the room... don't be scared... go in broke come out with bread I would tell them"
US minor 'Evangeline' talks about her time running a brothel on *The Sims Online*.

03 Mocking Mokia

HK: Enjoy the peculiar overcomplex stylings of Nokia's N-Gage, but don't fancy paying over the odds for old PlayStation games in phone clothing? Spotted locally by **Edge**'s favourite Hong Kong importer, Lik-Sang, the M-Gage is modelled on Nokia's machine.

While the games don't seem quite as sophisticated – the pictures suggest they're of the '800-in-one' LCD type you can pick up for a couple of quid at car boot sales across the country – the handheld does have one clear advantage over its Finnish counterpart: there's absolutely no chance of you having to hold it up to your face in public. See more at www.lik-sang.com

04 Run Lula, run

Germany: Is it any wonder **Edge** champions the charms of *DoAX*? CDV has chosen to promote its *Lula 3D* PC game with a calendar showcasing her protuberant talents. The result is a handy reference chart to all that is grubby and inept in videogames' efforts to get to grips with sex. It would seem that rather than aiming for the lucrative demographic of gamers who like looking at beautiful ladies, CDV have bravely chosen to target the much tinier market of prepubescent Plasticine fetishists.

If, for some reason, the calendar has left any potential purchasers undecided, you may wish to consider that the game has been thoughtfully designed to require only right-hand mouse input, and that Lula – in the course of chasing across America to rescue some erotic film performers from dastardly kidnappers – will be modelling her sexy new 'rubber slut' look.

05 Place invaders

US: Looking for something to brighten up your home for 2004? Top online nerd superstore www.thinkgeek.com is selling self-adhesive wall decals in the shape of classic invaders, allowing bachelor boys (or girls) to brighten up their pads with lurid pixel art. Each set includes seven 13-inch aliens in four different colours – red, electric blue, raspberry and kiwi – along with an orange base station shooter and a handful of colour-coded missiles. Those with significant others may find application of the (removable) transfers leads to a somewhat strained relationship. But, as we know so well, if you want style you've got to make sacrifices...

Data Stream a gaming year

Number of games with January in their title: 0
Number of games with February in their title: 0
Number of games with March in their title: 14
Number of games with April in their title: 0
Number of games with May in their title: 4
Number of games with June in their title: 2
Number of games with July in their title: 1
Number of games with August in their title: 0
Number of games with September in their title: 0
Number of games with October in their title: 4
Number of games with November in their title: 0
Number of games with December in their title: 0
Number of **Edge** staff who remembered *The Hunt for Red October* and *Devil May Cry*: 2
Number of **Edge** staff who remembered *My Merry May* (DC) or *June Classic Country Club and Rope Club* (Saturn): 0

03



Look familiar? Sound familiar? It's the M-Gage. Don't hold it up to your ear – it's not actually a mobile phone...



...but it does come with 11 built-in games, a calculator and an alarm clock. Is this the future of videogaming?

04



Several of the USA's most prominent historical figures are evidently not amused. We can't imagine why







05



But do they supply sticky numbers you can place up near the ceiling as high scores? No, they do not. Bah





Those stickers go where the joypad ports should be. If you want to play games, you'll have to add your own...



...and then transplant a new cable into this to make it all work. A little soldering later and voila, *Tempest 3K*



Fingers, signing copies of his book of videogame-inspired poetry. Those long winter nights must fly by





From tallest to smallest: Jumbo Grade Zaku (Gundam), Kimahri (*FFX*), Astro Boy and Neon Genesis Evangelion



Two more Gundam robots – although "these are toys, not model kits," asserts **Edge** reader Sami Khan



Gundam Fix Figuration and Sword Strike Gundam Chogokin toys. A good website if you like Gundam, then



And the cutest of the lot: Star Wars Kubricks and Mobile Fortune Gundam. Get a free one with any order over £39

06 Nu-Nuon update

UK: Last issue's Out There provided intrepid hardware hackers with a means to transform a Nuon *without* joypad ports into a Nuon *with* joypad ports, provided they already had a spare Nuon with joypad ports. Mostly useless then, but neat, and as we noted in the story it was very definitely a start. Richard Davies' latest update is much more useful because, while it requires a reasonable amount of delicate soldering, it no longer requires those hard-to-find ports. And that means anyone who can find a DVD system with the Nuon badge can indulge in some *Tempest 3K*, a temptation that most dedicated gamers will find hard to resist. See more at www.debaser.force9.co.uk/n505hack/

07 Red warrior shot the ode!

US: 'Blue Wizard Is About To Die' is a collection of poems about videogames, all written by Seth 'Fingers' Flynn Barkan. In Fingers' website biography, he bills himself as "the last of the speakeasy psychos" with "an anachronism-ridden existence". Oh, Fingers is not easy to love, for sure, but we're all for broadening videogaming's sphere of influence, and 'BWIAD' demonstrates that it's possible to write about the art using words more interesting than 'gameplay', 'uber-', and '-fest'.

There are more than 40 works here, including pieces on *Crazy Taxi*, *Bubble Bobble* and *Sinistar*. Our favourite, though, is 'Joust', which begins: "I don't think there is much doubt that riding an ostrich / is pretty gay, especially when done as some part of a / renaissance festival gone / horribly / horribly / wrong".

The rest of that poem, along with two other excerpts, can be read at www.twhi.org/bluewizard.htm where copies of the book can also be ordered.

08 Valley of the dolls

UK: Apparently, **Edge**'s robots, as presented in **E**131's 'Big Robot Love' feature, weren't good enough. One reader, Sami Khan, was so outraged by the feeble collection that he bribed **Edge** with free stuff if we plugged his website. But really… Mecha Production Facility is a design group creating clothing, music and other products featuring robots. Go to www.mecha.com to get the latest Gundam, Neon Genesis, Evangelion et al toys to make up for the disappointing Christmas presents you received.

Continue

Galleon
It's nearly ready, and it's looking good
Xbox emulation
Still the best thing to do on rainy Sunday afternoons
Bongos
The world needs more stupid peripherals

Quit

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
Because it doesn't last forever. We need a rewind
EA's Christmas TV Ads
*Not actual gameplay footage
UK's Sexiest Gamer
Try-hards. Next up: UK's Sexiest Stamp Collector!

OUT THERE
MEDIA

09 Gender-Inclusive Game Design

The problem of the female gamer is the problem of the female developer. Like the chicken and the egg, a vicious circle is currently in operation. Few female developers, few female players. The goal of this book is to start the transformation into a virtuous one. More female developers, more female players (or vice versa). For there's no fundamental reason why women wouldn't want to play computer games. They make up the majority of internet users and, significantly, players of web-based games – so why are there so few female console gamers?

Graner Ray reckons there are some simple steps developers could implement to improve their hitrate. One interesting example is that while male gamers are happy to play as female avatars, female gamers rarely play as male. So even a game with the choice of avatar gender is already limiting the choice of female players. Other recommendations include thinking about enabling both direct and indirect ways of beating the game, as indirect is more likely to appeal to women. Of course, it's likely the majority of fast action games are unlikely ever to appeal outside the stereotypical 15-to-30 male, but the bottom line, as ever, will be the bottom line of firms that can appeal outside that bracket.

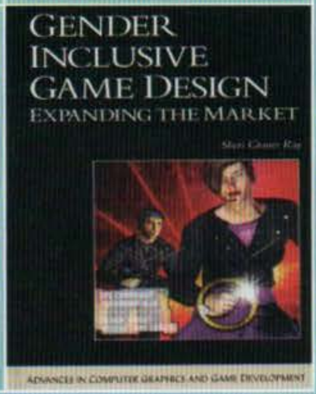
The developer with the highest percentage of women on staff? Well, that would be Maxis, the studio behind *The Sims*, which just happens to have the highest percentage of female players as well as being the biggest selling PC game ever. A coincidence? We think not.

10 Incompetence

Who would have thunk it? Rob Grant, co-creator of the once funny (in a teenage sorta way) 'Red Dwarf' has come up with a hilarious (in a grown up sorta way) novel. Actually, this is Grant's third book, and he certainly seems to have found a niche for his talents. Set in what's referred to as 'the united Europe of the far-too-near future', the passing of article 13,199 of the Pan-European constitution (which states; 'no person shall be prejudiced from employment in any capacity, at any level, by reason of age, race, creed or incompetence') is making private dick Harry Salt's life a misery. Not only has his partner been squished in a suspicious out-of-control elevator mishap, but the airline has lost his luggage and his shoes (again), his hotel room has no bed or bath and the local law officer, who suffers from extreme anger management issues, really hates his guts. And so it goes. Travelling around a continent on the trail of a very competent assassin, Salt staggers through a population afflicted by non-specific stupidity, attention-deficit issues and sexually inappropriate response disorders – and he still can't find a decent pair of shoes. Of course, before the end Grant has given up any pretence of worrying about plot and internal structural consistency, and Incompetence has slipped into a pool of surreal abstraction. Which might not sound particularly amusing thus explained but, like any good joke, the secret's wrapped up in the extremely competent delivery. Funny stuff.

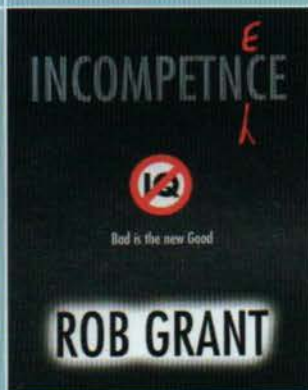
09

Author: Sheri Graner Ray
Publisher: Charles River
ISBN: 1 58450 239 8



10

Author: Rob Grant
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07419 1



11



Site: **Retrospec**
URL: **retrospec.sgn.net**

11 Website of the month

It's not the first time it has appeared in Out There, but a brief mention alongside another story in **E**122 doesn't really seem sufficient for Retrospec, a website devoted to remaking and updating classic games for modern PCs.

Everything on the site is lovingly constructed and free to download, and provides a perfect way to rediscover gaming's historical mechanics without having to return to the low-res and low-pallette graphical slums. A gorgeous *Head Over Heels* revamp is the latest addition, and should draw traffic and plaudits towards the site. In case it doesn't, it can have an **Edge** Award for General Loveliness. (There's no animated .GIF for that, so feel free to make your own.)

12 Advertainment

The Japanese ad for Sony's EyeToy features a popular but now retired sumo wrestler called Konishiki, who weighs in at a significant 606lbs. He originally came from Hawaii, but applied for Japanese nationality. He's still very popular in Japan.



The EyeToy is jumping up and down in front of the screen. A boy's voice pipes up: "EYETOY!"



Now the vast man is waving his arms about, for no apparent reason, in front of the window.



Konishiki has noticed the EyeToy and starts to have fun. People begin to gather around him.



The movements of his hands are accompanied by the sound effect of someone cleaning a window.



In the background, behind the noise, a song is can be heard playing: "Let's Play EyeToy, la la la…"



Alongside footage of *EyeToy: Play*'s window-washing minigame, Konishiki says: "I have entered the TV!"



Message along the base of the screen: 'Something really simple is coming.' A kid's voice shouts: "Yo!"



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

I'm disinclined to acquiesce to your copy protection

Listen up, me hearties. The people running UbiSoft don't trust you. They want you to buy their games, but they don't trust you. And in response to this, an open letter to 'MCV' decrying RedEye as a crack-addled conspiracy theorist, RedEye's sure they'll claim they trust you. "Oh, we trust you," they'll say. "It's those shifty characters down the market we don't trust, offering our precious, beautiful games on dirty, dirty CD-Rs. We think *you* are lovely."

They, or at least the mass of suited sketches in RedEye's crudely scribbled approximation, are lying. It is exactly you they don't trust, because you are made from the same genes as they are, and they love getting stuff for free. They thrill at every free lunch the company pays for, ones where they get paid to eat and drink and mull over ridiculous concepts for decisions like, say, copy protection. Free stuff is super, super, *super* fun, which is why they've introduced extreme anti-piracy measures in a patch for *Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield*, which, incidentally, is the most stupid name since *Super Mario Advance 4: Super Mario Brothers 3*'s football score.

See, *RS3:RS*'s anti-pirate epiphany isn't a CD check or a serial number. Nor is it a return to code-wheels or looking up the third word of the seventh line on the 13th page of a manual you've lost. *Raven Shield* is one of a conceivable next generation of games which takes a little wander around your hard disk and decides for itself if you're a suitable candidate for soldiery fun. If it finds a tool that could potentially copy games – Daemon Tools or Clone CD, for example – or even spots so much as a virtual drive, you are rejected.

Though reactionary geeks are quick to cry "What. About. My. Civil. Liberties!" at so much as the lack of an uninstall button, this time they have a point. This is the first insidious drip in a potential downpour, and it needs to stop now. Consider a future where EA thinks its monopoly on the human-management sub-genre isn't quite enough, and *The Sims 3* refuses to install on a machine where a rival publisher has a competing product. "The Sims has detected incompatible software on your PC!" it shouts. "Uninstall *Animal Crossing* to continue." The other problem is that, like so many PC things, it is an inflexible rule, a binary decision in an analogue universe. There will be people with shiny shop-bought PCs failing to run *Raven Shield* who have CD burning utilities on their hard disks and have never, ever touched them, let alone considered ripping off UbiSoft's shrinkwrapped product. How do you explain why their new game won't run, even though the PC meets the requirements on the box? Easy, RedEye supposes. You patiently explain how everyone's a big fat idiot, and make them promise not to buy a UbiSoft game again.

If only it were that easy. Ubi (affectionate shorthand for the *wonderful* company that released *Prince of Persia* and *Ghost Recon* – RedEye reserves the full name for its other side) isn't the only firm in danger of killing off PC gaming for good. Codemasters' FADE technology, of which it is very proud and rarely fails to mention, can apparently detect whether you're using a pirated game. If it finds that you are, the sirens do not go a-wailing, but instead the game continues, stifling a giggle. Then it makes itself harder, erratic, deteriorates the quality of the experience until it's unplayable. The plan is pirates can't detect if their crack is successful, can't distinguish between a badly ripped game and one they're not very good at.

Perhaps that theory is sound. RedEye can't help thinking that in practice FADE damages legitimate players as much as it harms the pirates. Every layer of technology around a gaming core makes it a little more unstable, and since there's really no such thing as a stable PC game in the first place, it's not like the code needs to be any more fragile. Crashing isn't the main worry, though, it's that the FADE protection has kicked in without you knowing. Doubt is ever present – missed shots, erratic enemies, puzzles you can't solve. Is it a failure on the part of you, or is it the game mistaking you for a pirate? Is it just a bug? You can't be sure.

"That's without wondering just what methods Codemasters use to detect piracy. Perhaps they do a scan for the eyepatch?"

That's without wondering just what methods Codemasters use to detect piracy. Perhaps they do a scan for the eyepatch? RedEye has no clue how they're staying one step ahead. The simple truth is you can't stay one step ahead of an evil-genius community determined to rip you off. All that anti-piracy methods, from code-wheels onward, have ever done is annoy the people who've done things right. Everyone else does an internet search for crackz, and they're away, hassle free. RedEye has no idea if someone's managed that for UbiSoft's game yet, but he doesn't doubt that they will. So what to do?

Look to *The Sims*, the best-selling PC game of all time. *The Sims* has a thousand reasons behind its success. One is that it's a game which rewards being part of the community, a community that ostracises pirates and praises those who pay into EA's ever-growing bank account with add-on-pack-inspired contributions. Steal the game and you can enjoy the cold code, but you can't ever feel part of *The Sims* world without a legitimate copy. So the way forward is to love players, not to mistrust them? Possibly. Though even *The Sims* has rudimentary copy protection. Perhaps the lesson is something broader: those who invest their time on more things than PC gaming are likely to go and buy copies of what they want, but generally they want nothing as most games are aimed at a small percentage of teenage boys who love getting free things more than anyone. Create games for a broader range of consumers than just pirates, and soon those pirates will be dwarfed, becoming less The Black Pearl marauding around the Channel, and more a couple of schoolboys in a dinghy. Arr, arr, arr.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

Does 'onwards' always mean 'upwards'?

As I write this column it's the season of goodwill to all men, and to celebrate this there are few better pastimes than to dust off the GunCons and spend a few hours shooting men on the TV. (It's okay, they're terrorists: I like to feel I'm doing my bit for the 'Coalition of the Willing', the 'Special Relationship', and various other bogus rhetorical abstractions.) This is a discipline I take seriously. Few things in videogaming are as satisfying to me as getting into The Zone in a *Time Crisis* game: taking out nine men with the nine bullets in my handgun magazine, reloading and doing it again. The challenge of doing this, and the immense pleasure it affords, is to me the essence of the game.

Now, to play *Time Crisis 3* as I believe she should be played, you have to adjust slightly. The new switchable weapons, with the crude splash of shotgun or grenade and the firehose machine gun, may slightly offend the fastidious shooter, but they can afford some muscular relief to the trigger finger, and you are still free to impose your own discipline, saving the power weapons until the odds are overwhelming, then letting out a cathartic roar as you spurt through your machine-gun clips (don't try this at home if you have thin walls).

But what worried me most to begin with was the presence of super-soldiers throughout the levels who have health bars that need to be worn down: no one-shot kills for these babies. A slight tweak of attitude, though, and all is fine: deftly switching to a grenade, taking them out, and back again to the handgun to kill their friends in one smooth sequence, or just shooting them to death with normal bullets while dropping their most dangerous cronies with alternate shots; either is just as gratifying.

So *Time Crisis 3* is good. Very good. In fact, if you have a yen for pointing a plastic replica firearm at the television and shooting imaginary men, it's about the best that can currently be hoped for. And this is my point: though it may be rather sniffily regarded as a merely 'generic' lightgun game in some quarters, it has afforded me more pleasure than almost any other supposedly more 'innovative' game in ages.

Sure, there is the odd game that makes me want to sit back, light up a cheroot and stroke my beard. However, if I am scoring for fun, then *Time Crisis* is up there with *Wario Ware* and *Soul Calibur 2* among my favourite games of 2003. Maybe this is a sign of some level of structural maturity that the videogame industry has attained. One often hears the complaint that most games are 'generic', working within well-defined parameters and just adding higher-poly models and prettier textures. But perhaps this is just a problem about mediocre games, not the fact that most games fit into genres. Consider the common sense inherent in the opposite point of view: you don't actually have to reinvent the wheel every time.

John Carmack took this stance recently. Some perspicacious journalist put to him the theory that *Doom 3* was, after all, pretty much the same as *Doom*: you wander around using a firstperson viewpoint and shoot monsters. Sure, said Carmack, it's the same. Why reinvent the wheel? "You don't have people inventing hundreds of new types of basketball," he pointed out, quite reasonably. It makes sense. The firstperson shooter is such a primally appealing game-type that Carmack's team has chosen to concentrate on boiling it down to its essentials and making it as viscerally and sensuously satisfying as can be. This is where aesthetics matter, where graphics whores triumph: you make the environments more real, and the monsters more scary, et voilà – it's the same kind of game, only this time it's better.

"Genres become genres because they work. Standardisation of a game style can allow designers to concentrate on improving the experience"

Of course, I do not mean to argue that there should be no more gameplay innovations. If id Software is trying to create the most terrifying, elemental arcade shooter, then it is also good that Warren Spector and co are trying to push the firstperson viewpoint into new areas of interaction. But it is also good that Infinity Ward can take some standard FPS gameplay off a nearby shelf and marry it to a breathtaking sense of dramatic scenario to produce the brilliant *Call of Duty*.

The fact is that, in all artforms, genres become genres because they *work*. And the standardisation of a particular game style can often allow designers to concentrate on improving the experience in other ways, secure in the knowledge that the tried-and-tested core mechanics are a reliable vehicle. The advantage of the fact that a good FPS engine has been commoditised is that it levels the playing field for creative work within that structure, but even the mighty *Halo* was not inherently very innovative. Sure, it messed around on the periphery with some nice things like the two-weapon limit, but it was the quality of the AI and the environment designs that really made the game what it is.

Innovation for innovation's sake, in other words, is not necessarily the be-all and end-all of game design just as it is not in other artforms. Not every film has to invent a new cinematic grammar like 'The Matrix'. Not every novel has to do funky new things with page layout like 'House of Leaves'. Similarly, in videogames, it is sometimes enough to do a familiar gamestyle but just do it with more vigour, style and aesthetic élan than anyone else. There is still, however, some risk to acknowledging this truth, which is the risk of stagnation and the risk of lessening ambition. If genres get too perfectly engineered, might they die? After all, how could *Time Crisis 3* be any better? People have tried the odd new thing with lightguns – as in *Impossible Mission*'s occasional puzzle-shooting elements, or the wandering-around bits in *Resident Evil: Gun Survivor* – but for me, *Time Crisis*'s central shoot-duck'n'reload-shoot mechanic cannot be improved upon. If the screen took up an entire wall that would be great, but beyond that what incentive is there to buy another lightgun game in the future? Well, simply the incentive of new levels, new enemies in new combinations. The same idea, more richly executed, is true in other genres, but a commodity the firstperson mechanic can offer us is the opportunity to explore an infinity of interesting new worlds.

Formal innovation is still a fertile field, but more innovation in content, using standard forms, will be no less interesting.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com



AV OUT

Toshihiro Nagoshi, general manager, Sega Creative Center division

Why 2004 could be Sega's year

Happy new year, everyone! And you know what a new year means – it's not just an opportunity to party hard, but you also get an opportunity to look back and reflect upon the year that's gone by. And what a year it was, especially for Sega.

As you'll no doubt have read, there have been big changes in the way we organise the studios. At Amusement Vision, my own studio, we welcomed the *Panzer Dragoon* and *Jet Set Radio Future* teams into our fold. And then there were all those business announcements, first of a merger with Sammy, then about the talks with Namco, and then… well, nothing happened. After all the speculation it came to nothing, and Sega has continued on its own.

So, in terms of games and business, 2003 was full of all kinds of sensations, surprises, and drama at Sega, not least in the work I've been doing. If you read this column regularly, you'll know that I've been developing a game which has become something of a symbol for a new era.

Who would have thought that some day we'd be working in cooperation with Nintendo? And, even then, who'd have thought that I would have the chance to work on *F-Zero*? Of course, I had to produce two versions of the game, one to go in the arcades and one for the home console market, so I'm sure you believe me when I tell you, as I've been telling you all year, that I've been dead busy! I mean it!

So what happens next? Well, we're in a situation akin to a pressure cooker here, and so we are keeping… yes, that's right, dead busy. All our time is consumed with the games we're currently working on – three separate productions being developed in parallel.

Guess what? None of them are sequels. We're only working on completely original stuff. Now, while you can be sure I'll go into detail about them in this column at some point in the future, I'm afraid the time isn't right now.

All I can say at the moment is that one of the three is based on an idea I first had four or five years ago. It's a very satisfying feeling, knowing that the situation is finally right for me to do the game now. And, yeah, I know that you're bound to be very curious about what it is, but I think that the earliest I'll be able to tell you anything about it, maybe, possibly, is when E3 is just around the corner. Sorry!

By the way, talking of E3, Sega will finally be able to free itself from the 'platform' area at this year's show. You don't understand? Do you know how E3 works when it comes to renting space on the show floor? Do you think that paying a lot of money gives you the right to a great big space inside the show?

Well, it has to be said there's some truth in that, of course, but it's mainly a question of dividing the space available at the show between the platform manufacturers and the developers. It's all about negotiation, you see.

Software makers have to negotiate their space on the show floor and make careful requests to the right people. The platform manufacturers, on the other hand, have priority. They get leases for a long period, over the course of several E3s. So this means that Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft all have the best places.

Sega, on the other hand, is no longer a member of that exclusive club, and with its software the company is now very much multiplatform. However, up until the last E3 we benefited from the long-term leasing agreement we made when we were still selling the Dreamcast. That's why we had a huge space there in 2003, just like we still were a console maker. For the 2004 show this agreement will be over, and we will be treated like a simple software developer, the same as any other.

"I know this sounds like a free advert for my company, but after such a long time having difficulties, I really think that 2004 will be Sega's year"

That's not to say you shouldn't come and visit us, because you definitely should!

Shall I give you my thoughts on what's going to be hot this year at E3? Well, there's no doubt that the PSP will be the subject of a lot of attention. It's been quite a mysterious piece of hardware up until now, but we're all going to see the light quite soon, I think.

Still, even though that is where most people are focusing their attention, I'm pretty sure that there is no way Nintendo will let Sony have all the glory, and that they'll come up with a new concept for a portable machine. It will be something different from their GBA SP.

I don't see them just resting on their laurels, and so they'll come up with something big, something they know will take some of the limelight and press attention away from Sony's publicity, something which will widen the portable gaming experience. Oh, of course, on top of this we'll find out a great deal about the capabilities and potential of the next generation of home consoles, hopefully.

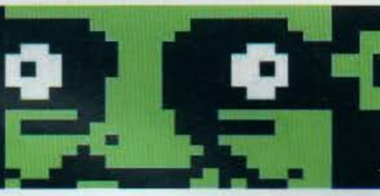
So sure, 2004's E3 is just bound to be a heady mix of rumours, information and excitement, just as it always is. But everything isn't purely about E3, particularly for Sega. Our company is now making a new start. Everyone here is full of new ambition, of energy, and our objective is to show how passionate we are.

Passionate about what? Well, about games of course. It's a new dynamic – you can see it everywhere in the company, particularly in the software presentations. I've seen so many desirable, top-quality titles recently, so many games with an incredibly high degree of challenge in their design. And while the huge recent restructuring changes within Sega caused much concern inside and outside the company at the start, we can all now see how much of a good thing it really is now.

You only have to look at the quality of the games we're working on here now. Yes, I know that this probably sounds like a free advert for my company, but after such a long time having enormous difficulties, I really think that 2004 will be Sega's year. And I hope all of you have a happy new year, too!

See you!

Prior to Sega's recent restructuring, Toshihiro Nagoshi was president of Amusement Vision



BIFFOVISION

Page 28, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

On staying 17 and growing breasts. Kind of...

The age of the average gamer is creeping steadily higher, as fewer of us refuse to give up the hobby with the onset of middle-age on the horizon. As one matures, one likes to consider one's tastes as becoming more refined. It'd be nice to think you don't change as you get older, that you're not ultimately turning into some horrible blend of your parents (I'm certainly developing my mother's breasts), and that you're not becoming too set in your ways, and all that. But the truth is you can't stay 17 forever. And, as Her Majesty's Courts recently pointed out to me, I'm not going to be able to hold back ageing by consuming the boiled flesh of teenagers. No matter how much of it I eat. Inevitably, I digress.

The point I'm making is that as I'm maturing (oh, all right – becoming an embittered old fart) my gaming tastes are becoming narrower. Nowadays, I rarely step outside of my favoured genres. Nevertheless, you can occasionally teach an old dog new tricks, and I'd like to think that I'm more open to certain new experiences (like having a catheter fitted) than I was ten years ago.

Go on – try and guess which game I played more than any other last year. *The Wind Waker*? Nah; too much semi-aimless wandering for my palate. *Devastation*? Pff! About as linear and tedious as shooters get. *The Sims Makin' Magic?* Hardly – I'm neither a girl nor a homosexual. Off-Ground Touch? Well yeah, but discussing what I get up to in school playgrounds has no place in videogaming's most-respected publication.

No, the game I've played more than any other this year is the Game Boy Advance version of *Scrabble*. What's that you say? That's most absurd thing you ever did hear in your entire life? Well I shit thee not: GBA *Scrabble* has dominated the last six months of my life. And to think I have the GBA's godawful screen to thank for it.

So, there I was in a hotel in Brighton (don't ask) twiddling my thumbs (stop sniggering) and bemoaning the fact I'd neglected to bring anything with me to read. I was unable to walk the three minutes to the nearest shop on account of my crippling apathy. I was sharing a good-sized family room with my daughters (shut UP), who had long since fallen asleep, meaning a game of British Bulldog was out. Nevertheless, Child B (it beat having to trawl through baby-naming books) had brought her GBA, along with several years' worth of review carts. Most of these – being the ignorant, *Pokémon*-only girl that she is – she'd never even bothered to look at.

Rooting through the bag, isolated in the dim semi-light of a single bedside lamp, I struggled to work out what was going on in *Super Mario Advance 2*, *Earthworm Jim* and others, before resigning myself to a toss-up between the original monochrome *Tetris* and – ye gods – *Scrabble*. By 4am I was still Scrabbling, my synapses firing with the intellectual stimulus of it all and my adrenaline gland pumping because I KNEW this wouldn't end. I'd be beaten, or beat the machine, and I could just start again. It was a game without end, because every time I turned it on I knew I was going to get a different selection of letters. Several months later I'm still hooked (short toilet breaks and attempts to earn a living notwithstanding). I'm not even playing it against other people – just the game's selection of hilariously-rendered artificial opponents. Sadly, they are my only friends these days. Undoubtedly, the cynics among **Edge**'s eternally youthful readership will indicate that this is indeed a sign I'm getting on in years. "What's that, old man? You can no longer bear the noise and the pace of today's cutting-edge titles?"

"My synapses firing with the intellectual stimulus of it all and my adrenaline gland pumping because I KNEW this wouldn't end"

Maybe so, but I like to see it more as a sign that I'm wising up while you lot are grounded in the ugly stupidity of youth. While I'm still playing my £15 *Scrabble* in six months' time, your 40-quid copy of *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* will have long since rotted on your shelf. How many games offer such open-ended gameplay? How many other games are this different and random every time you play? How many other games are so beautifully streamlined? Arguably, multiplayer gaming is open-ended, but how many of those test language skills beyond typing 'UR GaY'?

The thing is, modern gaming is geared towards the finite experience. You have a goal, you reach it, game over. Sure, you can always go back and try to get a better time, or score, or find all the poxy coins – but these are still finite. They have an end, either when you've seen everything there is to see or your patience runs out, whichever comes first. *Super Mario Sunshine* is a finite experience. *Prince of Persia* is a finite experience. *SSX3* will expire. *Halo*, *Half-Life* and *Pikmin* are all great games, to be sure, but games with an end. Developers have become so obsessed with telling a story, or with selling marketable characters, and so consumed with trying to turn games into the interactive equivalent of movies and books, that we're forgetting that games can be abstract and ongoing experiences. Would tabletop Monopoly be improved if play were broken up with vignettes telling the story of an evil property baron?

Stories, by their nature, have definable boundaries. Yes, we can always go back to familiar tales, but the surprises will be gone. How many infinite games have we seen in the past few years? *Worms*, the criminally unreleased *Animal Crossing*, *The Sims*, *Grand Theft Auto* (perhaps) and various post-*Tetris* puzzlers – though even some of those insist on featuring thoroughly pointless story modes – and that's about it. Far be it for me to advocate that every game be random, but if more games were to concentrate on providing some transcendent longevity than teasing us with an inconsequential and ultimately redundant plot, they'd surely provide better value.

Once again, I implore developers to get their heads out of Hollywood's backside and back into games. To take this medium and open it up, offer us something we can't get elsewhere. Hollywood may have been influenced recently by the visual presentation of games, but they're never going to be concerned by the lazy, derivative plotting.

Anyhow – that's enough from me. I've got a piss bag to change.

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*

prescreen

Incoming electronic entertainment from across the globe

Edge's most wanted

Metroid: Zero Mission

Edge played *Fusion* in absurd surround-sound grandeur, and – remake or not – we're ready for another burst of icy, isolated eight-way destruction.



(Game Boy Advance) Nintendo

Pikmin 2

We haven't even seen our first snowdrop yet, but the finest hint of spring is enough to trigger longings for some co-operative greenthumb adventuring.



(GameCube) Nintendo

Sudeki

Sometimes waiting this long for something is a pleasure. We've been suprised half a dozen times by how keen we are for some RPG freshness.



(Xbox) Microsoft

Gradius V

There's no company better than Treasure at making really big things blow up when really tiny things hit them. All we need now is a concrete release date.



(PlayStation2) Konami

Dis Studios launches Kyber Khommandos

When games miss the Prescreen boat

It's rare for **Edge** to attend a press event for a game that's come out of the blue, but *Kyber Khommandos* is one such title. It's a squad-based thirdperson high-octane stealth adventure starring a gang of foul-mouthed US Marine renegades out to obliterate the local crime syndicate. "It's sort of *Grand Theft Auto: M*A*S*H City*", explains lead designer **Karl Proust**, "except we've just tried to copy EA, pretty much. Their games all sell loads. We've given every soldier customisable beanies and several pairs of really baggy pants. Only we've called them trousers."

The game's design has been dictated by a mix of lazy copycatting and inept desperation. "To be honest," shrugs Proust, "nothing much happens after the first few levels. All we've done is mix up the terrain a bit and max out all the sliders on enemy shot power. We figured reviewers would give up and call it 'unforgivingly hard' rather than persevering and finding out how shit the ending is." In the interests of longevity, Dis has added a story mode with a combo multiplier based on how many NPCs and cupboards you go up to and push 'X' at.

It's not real, of course (although we've developed a fondness for the premise over the last few paragraphs), but there are plenty of titles like this that don't make it into Prescreen. Dozens of identikit PC RTSs, a clutch of crass kid-targeted cash-ins, a rollcall of lacklustre men-with-guns safe bets. Iceberg games, in other words, the 80 per cent that lurk beneath the surface – neither inspiringly good nor instructionally bad enough to break the surface of most gamers' awareness. These are the games that aren't previewed here, whose developers **Edge** doesn't visit.

Instead, **Edge** dedicates its pages to the innovative and the intriguing, with the result that its preview pages can seem unremittingly sunny. But isn't it naive – or worse, cruel – to raise hopes for games that might well disappoint at review, as good ideas and fine intentions are beaten down by tight deadlines, inelastic budgets and technical impossibilities? No. What would be cruel is to sell short the creativity and ambition of so many good developers, with so many good ideas, are trying so hard to make something truly exceptional. Previews are the time to talk about what games might be capable of. And judging by the frenzied re-invention of *Resident Evil*, the firstperson breakthrough of *Splinter Cell* (below) and the playful physics of *Painkiller*, that's just about anything.













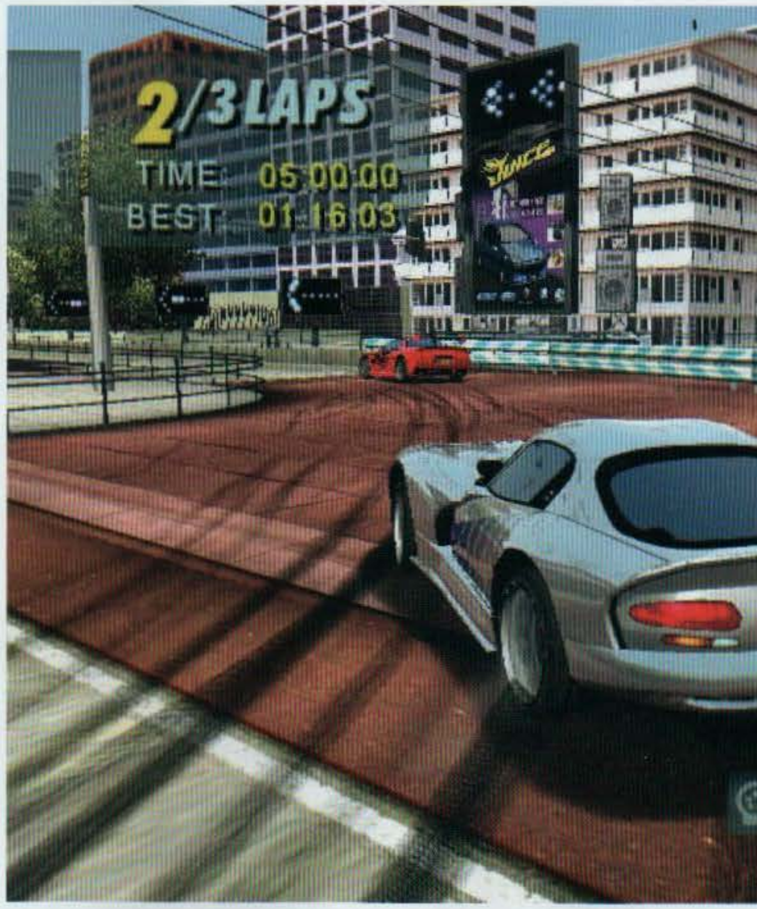
Juiced

Even Formula One has forgotten the most vital truth: motorsport is a story about people, not technology. Yet it seems gaming isn't prepared to make the same mistake. How refreshing...



Even coming in fourth place out of four doesn't mean you've necessarily lost – so long as an AI teammate takes the chequered flag. A well-placed bet on the race can yield a huge cash bonus, too





Can't surf? Then cruise

Perhaps the most promising aspect is *Juiced*'s online functionality, about which the studio is somewhat tight-lipped. Prying reveals racing to be fully cross-format, however, and the respect system remains at the core of play. The crew system is ideal for boosting online play, as is the accompanying betting aspect. Expect online trading of parts and cars, too.

Time and again **Edge** has seen the clinical precision with which current technology can render vehicles, yet so often the spirit is absent. The curves are there, but the sense of dangerous speed barely contained – and all that entails for the driver – is not.

So the burgeoning trend towards personalised, customised cars racing in 'lifestyle' oriented events, rather than professionally governed championships, is perhaps unsurprising. Factor in phenomena such as Hollywood's 'The Fast and the Furious' movies and the links with the rap lifestyle, itself a highly marketable commodity, and such a treatment appears to be more than just a niche. And *Juiced* is squarely aimed at exploiting it.

At first glance similar to EA's *Need For Speed Underground*, it goes much further by welding on associated aspects such as betting, gathering and directing a 'crew', the mastery of stunts and playing to the crowd. Vitally, it also has a highly pleasing driving model, something the aforementioned title patently lacks. While Juice Games' claims of 'realistic' physics fall short of the mark, the dynamics are authentic enough to please enthusiastic drivers while remaining entirely accessible to more casual players. An early playtest revealed a pleasing weight and depth to the controls, despite the game still having some months in development before its September due date.

"Each trick is named and the cars are supple, capable of drifts, handbrake turns, 360s, reverse spins and doughnuts"

Events are spread across a fictional American location, currently called Angel City, and comprise point-to-point dashes, street circuit races, straight drags and cruises. The latter entails simple showing off for the crowds. Obvious patches of rubber-smeared concrete dot the track, and performing the stunts the crowds howl for earns extra points. These points can be multiplied with combos in a way reminiscent of Tony Hawk et al – each trick is named and the cars are supple, capable of drifts, handbrake turns, 360s, reverse spins and doughnuts. Such behaviour also pays off in the races themselves, as the mechanism governing the game is 'respect'. Pull off a 360 while leading and still win, for instance, and you will benefit massively – whereas crashing will lose you respect. Any damage must also be paid for, though there are options to either restore everything or simply mend the vitals. Ragged cars are not well received.

The respect system is linked directly to the player's control of a crew. Success, and an appropriately customised car, gathers admirers, and some will ask to join you. Players can control up to three AI teammates via simple commands – push harder, back off or hold station – in response to their agitation levels (when stressed, drivers are faster but more likely to crash). This means success can come even if the player fails to win, so long as a member of their clan takes it. Who drives which car is also left to the player's discretion, and you need not race at all should you so decide, instead sending out teammates and controlling their pace. Regular running in

Format: **Xbox, PS2, PC**
Publisher: **Acclaim**
Developer: **Juice Games**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **September 2004**















particular events also sees a skill increase, and further profits are available from gambling – again it's not simply about winning.

The options, although yet to be firmly set, will include such things as any crew member winning, your team finishing 1-2-3-4 or the player beating a specific racer. Races themselves also have varying objectives, and each fresh area of the city is unlocked after a high-stakes race for pink slips. These are the V5s, as vehicle ownership documents are known in the UK, rather than pieces of silky negligee. Given the strangely homoerotic nature of obvious influence '2Fast 2Furious', this is a good thing, though losing your car and all its customising parts remains painful.

The cars themselves cover Japanese 'technology' supercars (the now-familiar Lancers, Skylines and Imprezas), flamboyantly powerful US muscle cars and the impotently furious shopping boxes so beloved of supermarket car park-based youths. These include Civics, Clios and other such nonsensical mumsymobiles, yet the licensed bodykits, alloys, nitrous and turbos mean each of the 50+ vehicles can be sliced and shaped beyond recognition.

Though all this may sound a lot for a new studio to pull off, behind the new name lurk the creators of the highly promising *Lamborghini*, which disintegrated within weeks of the shelves when Rage succumbed to the dying of the light. EA now owns that game but currently has no plans to release it: when *Juiced* finally squares up to *NFS Underground*, we may just find out why.



Every trick has a name, and you gain respect for pulling them off. Respect is lost if you mess up the trick and crash into the railings

Painkiller

Some developers are pushing firstperson shooters into brave new worlds. And some are trying to reinvent others...





The architecture has a gothic feel and some of the baddies have pseudo-religious leanings, which all adds up to a typical feel for a PC game. But the devil is in the detail, and you have to feel the physics



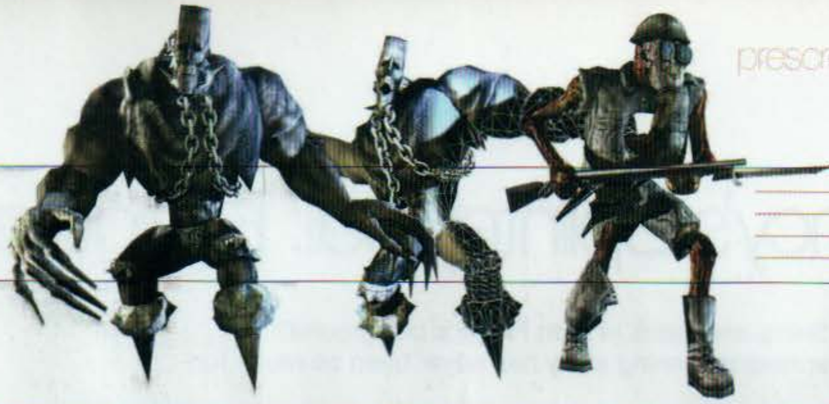
Game names can be deceiving. *Painkiller*, for instance, is not all about attacking pain where it hurts, but simply attacking anything that crosses your path. Just plain *Killer* would be a more accurate label for this PC firstperson shooter, but presumably that wouldn't sound nearly as 'cool' to the ears of those marketing it.

Wonky title aside, there are things here worth celebrating. This is the first title to come out of People Can Fly, a Polish developer set up in early 2002, and it has all the hallmarks of European codeshops down the ages, from ambitious proprietary graphics technology to some in-your-face, if familiar, gameplay.

You assume the role of Daniel Garner, a hero with the same scornful expression and long black leather jacket as so many game protagonists. His dilemma, however, is a little out of the ordinary: he's dead. What's worse, he's trapped in a realm somewhere between heaven and hell, having been denied entry upstairs. It seems that the only way to find out what he's done to deserve such treatment is to run, shoot and jump through 24 levels of twisted, stripped-down firstperson action.

While *Half-Life 2*'s development continues to blend AI, narrative, physics and a whole lot more in an attempt to carve out the future of PC gaming, *Painkiller* is focusing on a narrower set of goals. Key among them is its use of the Havoc 2.0 physics code, which lends the game a weirdly organic feel. The best way to describe the game's physics is t run through a scene. One level, for example, has you starting out facing a large stone archway. As in every other level, the lighting here is subdued, but there's enough illumination to make visible a small rural cart up ahead. You aim your weapon – a steampunk-styled device capable of firing wooden stakes at high velocity – at it and loose off a projectile. '*Thunk*' it goes as it hits home, embedding itself in a wheel, sending the cart flipping over and on to its back. But then you notice that the wheel is still spinnin the stake protruding from a spoke going around and around as it does so. Eventually comes to rest. It's a tiny detail but one that immediately makes the gameworld feel like a

"The creatures you come up against are all skull heads, spikes and grey/brown flesh tones, and there are loads of the things"



Format: **PC**
Publisher: **DreamCatcher**
Developer: **People Can Fly**
Origin: **Poland**
Release: **TBC**













place you haven't visited before. You fire off some more stakes and watch as the Havoc code does its thing, flopping the cart over with an addictive sense of inertia.

Rounding the corner you spy a tattered flag hanging from a pole. Another target. It too has been given remarkable physical properties – your stake snags into it, sending the cloth flapping around and in on itself, furling and unfurling in realtime.

Some of the developer's claims are less obvious to the naked eye. Its PAIN engine, for example, is purported to be capable of handling '100 times more polygons than other games', although it's not made clear which titles are being used as benchmarks against which to judge such an extravagant claim.

The creatures you come up against within its large, crumbly environments are graduates from the *Doom* school of design, all skull heads, spikes and grey/brown flesh tones, and there are loads of the things. Their pack-like attacks bring to mind *Serious Sam*.

And this is, after all, very much a straightforward firstperson shooter, despite the extravagant physics and other touches. In fact, think *House of the Dead* taken off of its rails and you're not far off in terms of feel.

But then there are the other weapons. And the multiplayer modes. And the 100-foot-tall, hammer-wielding boss…

Clearly there's a lot more to *Painkiller* than at first appears. We'll take another look at the game closer to its completion.

The Havoc component naturally includes rag-doll technology, allowing enemy bodies to be flung around with abandon once you've nailed them with the appropriate weapon



Stakes are high

However much fun it is to simply mess around with it, your stake-launcher wasn't built as a plaything. It was fashioned as a weapon to take out the undead, and it does so in glorious style. But it's what happens once you've hit your target that's particularly noteworthy: your projectile passes through their body and, if there's a solid surface behind, attaches them to it like a mouse pinned to a dartboard. Amusingly dark stuff.

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Fancy a quick game of Shirts and Skins in Sam Fisher's playground? A new kind of multiplayer means running away has never been so much fun.

If you stop and think, it becomes obvious. A competitive stealth game cannot have a traditional thirdperson camera arrangement. If the camera can rotate to face in the opposite direction to your character, then you can see over your shoulder. And if you can see over your shoulder, then anyone sneaking up behind you is going to feel like a clumsy chump.

It was a conundrum that bothered Gunther Gallipot, creative director of *Pandora Tomorrow*, from his first glimpse of *Metal Gear Solid*. His answer is as radical as it is irrefutable. *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* will pit firstperson players against thirdperson opponents. Which, initially, seems like only half a solution. How could this not hand exactly the same advantage detailed above to the thirdperson players?

"The spies are made of rubber and oil – that's how it feels as they bounce to grab high ledges and seep invisibly round corners"



By balancing, of course, and a sensitive and remorselessly detailed kind of balancing at that. It makes perfect sense for the ninja-like Shadownet spies to have the advantage of thirdperson surround vision. By their nature, they ought to have a heightened awareness of what's going on around them – a sixth sense about what waits round the next corner. The price they pay is that not only are they highly



Although the Shadownet guns are non-lethal, players can use them to detonate mines, shoot out cameras, and puncture fire-extinguishers to coat a passing merc's visor in blinding foam





UbiSoft have developed a radical new PS2 shadowing system which responds dynamically

vulnerable to mercenary fire, but their own weapons are only able to stun opponents – their only way to permanently take a merc down is with a hand-to-hand neck snap. Gallipot calls this 'limiting the lethal distance,' and it's the main way the game squares the odds between the all-seeing spies and the firstperson Argus mercenaries. The latter's offensive might and defensive toughness make up for the peripheral limitations of their Cyclops-visored viewpoint.

Although you have a completely free choice over which character you select to play, in reality it's no choice at all. Everyone instinctively knows whether they're a spy or a merc, whether they want a gun in their hand or a creep in their step. **Edge** knows, deep down, that it's a spy.

The levels, which host a range of missions in which Shadownet might have to defuse a number of strategically placed terminals, or pick the mercs' pockets for their ID cards, are designed to provide each side with some natural habitat – bright, empty corridors which favour the mercs, and gloomy courtyards bristling with zip ropes and chain-link fences for the spies to Spider-man their way around. Victory will often depend on luring your opponents on to your own turf, where you can use your advantages to the full.

The Shadownet operatives may be based on Sam Fisher, but they play like an evolutionary leap. Sam is made of bone and



sinew, slowed by the caution gleaned from years of experience. The spies are made of rubber and oil – or at least that's how it feels as they bounce to grab high ledges and see[p] invisibly round corners. Their space is three dimensional, letting them dangle from pipes and crouch, coiled, on top of boxes while th[e] mercs patrol the corridors below like bulls. Heavy, strong and well armed, their visors plug them directly in to the level's security systems. If a laser is tripped or a camera triggered they have an immediate and accurate readout on where the intruder is. Then it's a race through the level to get there before the spy has the chance to hide himse[lf] away – always supposing, of course, that hi[s] teammate isn't waiting to drop on your head as you roar through the hallways.

Mercs' special visors can track movement, which means nervous ninjas will want to take cover behind shadowy boxes

Format: **PS2, Xbox, GC, PC**
Publisher: **UbiSoft**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **France/China**
Release: **Spring 2004**









As well as the visual variety brought by sending Sam out to play, there is also more scope for mixing up play styles. Some of the jungle settings are designed to allow players to let off steam

when they approach. Behind a box, however, you can't see what's coming – so you turn on your heat-detection goggles and you're sitting pretty. Except you're not, because the mercs can switch over to an electro-magnetic detector which picks up on the goggles' trace. Unfair? Why no, because the ninjas can see by the colour of the merc's visor which system he's using, and adapt accordingly. Each tiny nuance out-trumps the last, and makes the game a constant challenge of thinking on the balls of your feet.

It's a staggeringly bold move, and most of Galipot's colleagues thought he was a touch deranged when he first proposed it. Traditionally, multiplayer games allow you to take the skills you've honed in the main game and use them to challenge your friends. Shadownet vs Argus will require you to adapt to a whole new style of play, and to two new control configurations. Combined with the shift into firstperson, it might prove enough to flummox the casual players that *Splinter Cell*'s producers hope to target. There's also the possibility that Sam himself will feel rather a comedown after the elastic acrobatics of the Shadownet character. But while it may prove a risk, it's the very best kind of risk to be taking. From the ingenuity of the original theory to the meticulous and imaginative detail of the execution, *Pandora Tomorrow* will take the multiplayer game somewhere it has never been before.



The singleplayer Sam

After the prodigious success of the first *Splinter Cell*, it was never likely that UbiSoft would have risked any substantial meddling. Instead, *Pandora Tomorrow* takes Sam out of his natural corridor habitat and sets him loose across the globe. Although the story is still substantially under wraps, it's clear the plot will sail pretty close to the political wind. Sam's tour will take in potential real-world flashpoints like Indonesia, Jerusalem and LAX. Levels are much more open, from steamy cannabis glades to derelict docks. Aware of the risk of disorientation, the designers have planned the lighting for each area to direct your interest in a particular direction, highlighting the multiple routes around each mission.

Having listened closely to feedback from reviews and players, UbiSoft has taken on the criticisms levelled at the first game. The fat reticule, which made aiming difficult, has been replaced with an optional laser target – although using it runs the risk of alerting guards to your presence. Also modified is the 'three hits and you're out' rule. Each slip-up, however, will provoke the guards into a higher level of alert – they'll put on body armour and patrol more aggressively. Their amnesia should also be a thing of the past – you can't shoot their partner and hope they'll regress to their usual routines after a minute or two. Some new moves – the thigh-testing split jump and the 'Mission Impossible'-inspired SWAT turn – may not have a radical impact on gameplay, but add to the magnificently physical presence of Sam Fisher.





The train set-piece plays very well, forcing you to use the full panoply of your stealth gear to get into a position to use your laser microphone and eavesdrop on a suspected double agent

Astro Boy: Tetsuwan Atom

Format: PlayStatio
Publisher: Se
Developer: In-hou
Origin: Jap
Release: March (Japan), TBC (U

Astronomical popularity, astronomical viewing figures, and now, for Astro Boy, what Sega hopes will be an Astronomical Interactive Adventure









He's a retro icon, but following a CGI makeover (not into 3D, but with digital processing smoothing the 2D look) Astro Boy is back on Japanese television. That's why Sega picked up the licence for development – along with the fact that even after so long he remains one of the most popular cartoon characters in Japan. Initially developed by UGA, and now by Soni Team following the amalgamation of the two studios, *Astro Boy: Tetsuwan Atom*'s presence on Sega's 2004 line-up brings a strong brand name to a company still seen a weak in the eyes of many consumers.

The player controls Atom in what amoun to a simple action adventure, and flies (or walks, if so desired) his way through Metropolis, a huge city divided up into areas which are unlocked on the completion of a se number of missions. Character attributes are also unlocked with progress; each upgrade adds a new ability, such as firing lasers from the fingers, or shooting cannon balls from Atom's Astro Boy arm. Special moves are available too, but that's not to say that things get overly complex. Quite the opposite, in fact, since the game is targeted at 'casual' users (Sega's words, not ours), and attacks are all based on a single button.







Astro Boy: Tetsuwan Atom is the first game developed in Japan to use the Havok 2 physics library. That said, it's unclear exactly *where* it's used – its impact on the game appears minimal, at least from we've witnessed so far



Resident Evil Outbreak

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (UK)**

Previously in E125, E129

The game once known as Resident Evil Online may be nothing of the sort in the UK. So how does solo play compensate?

Before you dismiss *Outbreak* as another shoddy Capcom conversion, now likely to arrive on these shores minus its USP, consider the singleplayer option in which potential online buddies are replaced by the game's artificial intelligence. Can you really imagine the average deathmatch jockey happily indulging in the caring and sharing that's required to stem the zombie tide? Then maybe it's for the best that you'll only be able to play with computer-controlled characters pre-programmed to watch your back.

Capcom is hoping the co-op dynamic takes off, because otherwise it's largely the same old *Resi* that we know and love/hate: daft conspiracy storylines, clumsy character control and interminable loading times between rooms. You get the same dumb American character types too, except these are regular guys instead of S.T.A.R.S. agents, each with their own distinct abilities and moves. This means you've all got to work together to make the best of any situation.

The sharing mechanic is actually quite cute. If other characters are in the vicinity, you can rifle through their items and highlight something you want to exchange. Your character then pleads for a swap (We liked Kevin's needlessly sarcastic "Can I have it, pretty please?") and, if accepted, the handover is animated on the screen.

Four categories of command – 'help', 'follow me', 'thanks' and 'get out of my face and go and do something more useful' – allow you be understood by the AI, and it's cheering to see computer-controlled characters rushing to your defence or following you to safety if you discover an exit. They also act independently, wandering into new rooms, picking up herbs and even combining items by themselves.

However, there's a lot the computer-controlled characters just *won't* do, such as helping you solve puzzles, getting out of your way, attacking the zombies in any kind of sensible, strategic manner or ever shutting up. "Found anything new?" asks Mark. "Are we making progress?" asks Cindy. "Found anything new?" asks Mark. No, not in the three seconds since you last asked, you clot. Their vaguely convincing utterances are initially impressive, but the continuous repetition can be torture.

Ultimately, that's the problem with ambitious AI – you end up terminally frustrated by the few things it *can't* do rather than all the cool things it can. The best way to minimise irritation is to treat your fellow characters as simple item carriers, rushing through the game by yourself and hoping they follow you with fresh supplies of green herb. Played like this, *Outbreak* becomes little more than *Resident Evil 3* with bumbling sidekicks. Obviously, the gameplay mechanic would be entirely different with human players, engendering a genuinely new *Resi* experience. So get petitioning.







Each character has a special move to either kick or dodge zombies until armed comrades wade in.







The ability to exchange items between characters is a major new gameplay innovation. It remains to be seen if human players will be generous in sharing their precious herbs, but AI characters will generally yield up what they find, so you can use them as mobile item boxes





The (over) familiar setting is Racoon City, but you play as civilians, not S.T.A.R.S. agents

Crimson Sea 2

Format:	PlayStatio
Publisher:	Ko
Developer:	In-hou
Origin:	Japa
Release:	Spring 20

What do you do when your big Xbox hope doesn't perform to expectations? You put the sequel on PS2, of course...









The Over Drive attacks, which let players use more than one weapon at the same time, have also been improved. It's possible to fling an enemy up into the air and then open fire



Crimson Sea was announced for Xbox at the console's Japanese launch. It found a release in December 2002, but by that time it was clear the Xbox's installed base would restrict opportunities for the series, and a PS2 version was considered. It never happened, but it's of little surprise that the sequel has been announced for Sony's machine, not Microsoft's.

And maybe that's the biggest change, because structurally the game is very similar indeed, with waves of 'Starship Troopers'-style enemies attacking in their hundreds. The spirit of *Shin Sangokumusou* is evoked, but more so. Honed code and improvements in PS2 programming mean Koei can throw more enemies at the player at once, to the game's benefit. The objective? An intensity rarely seen outside scrolling shoot 'em ups.

Full-on attack isn't the only solution to the player's problems, though, nor will it always prove successful. Using the environments to your advantage will be vital, as will mastering the different types of weapon: guns, blades and 'neo psyonics'. The latter are special moves used to defeat a large number of enemies at once, the modern-day equivalent of the smart bomb, and appropriate when facing a boss, or just in times of extreme peril.

Not that there'll be many moments when the player *isn't* in peril, of course. As they progress, their character gains experience to spend levelling up their weapons. Choosing to concentrate on ballistic weaponry could brin 'The Power Bullet Gun', which fires a limited number of high-energy bullets. Putting points into swords, on the other hand, might bless them with 'The Gravity Blade', which slices through the laws of gravity, tossing enemies around like weightless rag dolls.





The upgraded engine means the developer is able to considerably raise the enemy count

Core improvements over the original, though, are few. Time Extend allows control o time, and combos are more easily executed so dramatic screenshots can be more easily taken. It's unlikely that particular marketing tickbox will be enough to sell *Crimson Sea* o its own, but the Xbox version was attractive enough, and it will be interesting to see if it receives the success on PS2 it was deprived of on Microsoft's machine.



Multiplayer allows two characters on the same screen to play head-to-head or co-operatively. In Tournament, players compete to kill the most enemies in a limited amount of time

Nightshade

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Sega WOW**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **March 5 (UK), Out Now (Japan)**

It didn't work for the Karate Kid, but could Sega's ninja action be strengthened by the feminine touch?

What's in a name, then? Nightshade (or Kunoichi as she's known in her home territory) is the daughter of Sega WOW, the division formed by the company-wide series of mergers that took place throughout Sega in September 2003. Sega WOW is the marriage of one of Sega's least notable divisions (WOW Entertainment) with one of its most colourful (Overworks, the team responsible for *Skies Of Arcadia* and the original PS2 *Shinobi*) in the hope that the fruits of the union would be more refined than inbred.

The opening levels of *Nightshade* feel more apprehensive than auspicious. One difference in this pseudo-sequel to *Shinobi* is an attempt to make the game more accessible. Players are given a better chance to acquaint themselves with the 'Tate' system of combat (see 'My flair lady') before worrying about stringing together daisychains of wall runs and mid-air sword swipes. That's not at the expense of additions to the combat, however.

Nightshade is a female assassin, meaning she's a far quicker toy than Shinobi, but is none the weaker for it. She retains all the graceful ninjitsu of her forebear – stealth dashes to, from and around enemies, for instance – but brings a shield-cracking kick attack to the kill. Her footwork can be used to launch enemies into the air, and bring them back down to the ground with enough force to splat any nearby enemies, like a makeshift mortar. Short swords can be employed up close to boost the combo meter, and striking an enemy in mid-air allows you to jump and dash once again, allowing you to stay airborne for as long as there are healthy enemies up there with you. It's this latter detail that presents some of the most interesting possibilities for hyper-combo crafting.

Additions are one thing, though, but initial impressions aren't glowing. And that's the first worry: *Nightshade* seems to contain very little of the effervescent hues of the original and, generally, doesn't look as distinctive. There's no obvious gaping gash in the gameplay as such, everything still works, but it just feels devoid of the pizzazz that made *Shinobi* feel like so much funky, whispering death. The fate of *Nightshade* will hinge on those later levels, where the new combat elements come into serious play. We're hoping it doesn't gum up into the pixel-perfect demands of something like *Gun Valkyrie*, otherwise the female of the species may not turn out to be deadlier than the male, after all.









Nightshade sports ninja pigtails that draw out some swish trails of lighting in her wake. They're not quite as striking (or practical) as Shinobi's own tattered crimson scarf, though







The 'Tate' move still works its rush of satisfying magic, making the player feel like an unstoppable one-man/woman army. Hopefully the later stages of the game will feel more assassin than asinine



My flair lady

The cumulative 'Tate' system has now been made slightly less vague, by the use of a meter that surrounds your spirit bar and shows how much time you have to continue the combo before it fizzles out. The 'Tate' is a glorious flourish that Nightshade receives whenever she eliminates four or more nearby enemies in quick succession. Perform one, and your character holds an aloof pose and utters a terse one-liner while the enemies crumble and collapse all around you in unison. Ninjas don't 'do' cool, it seems, because they don't have to.

Kokakukidotai: Stand Alone Complex

Format: PS2
Publisher: SCE
Developer: In-house
Origin: Japan
Release: March (Japan) TBC (UK)

Manga fetishists will be feverish already, but can SCEI's take on Ghost In The Shell live up to their expectations?













'Ghost In The Shell' fans will be looking forward to the series and the game, but the big news is Oshii's work on a proper sequel to the first movie. 'Innocence' is due out in March, and features most of the first film's characters

Famous to manga fans as the creator of 'Ghost in the Shell', Shirow Masamune's work is currently in full revival. He'd been out of the public eye since the manga's superb movie adaptation (produced by Mamoru Oshii) in 1996, but 'Ghost in the Shell' returned last year with a series called 'Kokakukidotai Stand Alone Complex'. Kokakukidotai, a composite word approximating to 'a group of cyborgs', came out on 14 DVDs for the first season, and the second season should have begun by the time you read this. It's SCEI which grabbed the licence, and it's hoped it'll do substantially more with it than was managed with its 1997 PlayStation adaptation.

Then, the game was noted for some decent Motion JPEG technology rather than the actual game. Now, the experience is substantially more pleasurable – giving the player control of two characters: a woman called Kusanagi Motoko and a man named Bateau, both part of Tokyo's special 'Ninth Section' police force. It's 2030, and the division is comprised predominantly of cyborgs, allowing SCEI to afford the player *Deus Ex*-style control of security systems and cameras. Players can switch between the two characters, each of which, naturally, has their own strong and weak points, although we don't know if this goes any deeper than the 'slow and strong/fast and weak' duality that has plagued videogaming since the eighties.

The thirdperson adventure's combat encompasses both guns and kung fu, and acrobatic moves can be performed off the scenery, a technique which we're assured will prove good for dealing with multiple enemies. No word on bullet time yet, but it wouldn't surprise, and it wouldn't necessarily disappoint, either. Well, the videogaming world needs someone to write *Enter The Matrix* properly, doesn't it?



Gun combat seems dwarfed by the majesty of the kung-fu moves on offer from your cyborg

Silent Hill 4: The Room

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **TBC**

Konami scales back its silent-horror ambitions to a single location – but adds in a whole lot more. Confused? That seems to be the idea…





Silent Hill 4 follows new character Henry Townshend, who finds himself trapped in his (apparently cursed) apartment, the only way out being through portals which lead into "disturbing alternate worlds". It's like 'Location, Location, Location' set in hell

A three-minute trailer at Konami's press day announced the next in the ever-grimy *Silent Hill* series, though many of the assembled throng will have been left scratching around for ways to fill their thousand-word commissions. After all, there's only so many different ways you can write about another adventure featuring misshapen fleshy lumps hauling themselves around corridors, as seen through Konami's patented 8mm Grain-o-matic. Regardless, we will try: despite the press release insisting that this takes the series in a new direction, you'll be unlikely to see rainbows and bunnies in *Silent Hill 4*. Aside from rainbows of dark blood and wild-eyed gut-bunnies, naturally.

There are some departures. For the first time some of the action will be seen through the eyes of the main character, a perspective change unlikely to dissipate the gloomy tension for which the series is renowned. The video concentrated not on the gameplay – which we suggest will remain a mix of key/lock research, obscure puzzles and beating up sacks of writhing flesh with upsetting regularity – but on the visuals. Fans of Cameron Diaz will be pleased to note Sato-san's obsession with wide-mouthed blondes appears to continue, while those who appreciate *Silent Hill*'s more repulsive aspects are unlikely to be let down either.





Silent Hill wouldn't be *Silent Hill* without the use of grainy visual filters over the action and a palette heavy on the browns and blacks

Nanobreaker

Format: **PS2**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **TBC**

It is the future – again. And everything's gone wrong – again. Who do you think might be responsible for putting things right?





The whip-like plasma weapon leads to some impressive visual effects as it shape shifts across the screen in a dazzling array of colours



It's possible for players to pick up downed machines and use them as a second form of attack. Combo modes, meanwhile, come in both 'easy' and 'advanced' flavours



It appears Koji Igarashi may have tired of gothic action-platforming and his extended family, the Belmonts. The *Castlevania* producer's latest work has nothing to do with the series where he made his name, at least in terms of plot.

Nanobreaker concerns a future where nanotechnology has gone wrong: the microscopic machines built to enrich humanity's lives have turned against their creators, stripping buildings of metal and people of blood. And blood is where the emphasis in *Nanobreaker* appears to lie, the video footage revealing a combo-oriented thirdperson action game drenched in so much claret the BBFC are duty-bound to blanche.

Several similarities between *Nanobreaker* and *Castlevania* are present, not least the whip-like weapon used by the hero, a shape-shifting plasma blade which dissects and disassembles enemies. Fighting something as small as nanobots might prove difficult, so it's lucky that the bots have decided their best weapon against humanity is not to make use of their insidious size, but the enormous robots they are able to construct from harvested metal. They also appear to have filled them with blood, hence the red storm – although we're not quite sure why, other than to provide the game with a very visceral visual selling point.

Wangan Midnight: Maxi Boost

Format: Arcad
Publisher: Namc
Developer: In-hous
Origin: Japa
Release: Spring (Japan), TBC (UK

The success of Sega's Initial D was scripted in manga; now Namco's new coin-op takes a similar road...





The magnetic card system allows players to keep a record of their progress in the game and continue playing with the same stats

The main difference between *Initial D* and *Wangan Midnight* is in the type of racing they portray. While *Initial D* covers duels on Japan's twisty and dangerous mountain routes (the 'Toge'), *Wangan Midnight* takes the action to Tokyo's highways. 'Wangan' refers to the highways that border the Tokyo Bay area – the other commonplace road term being 'Shutoko', meaning the highways that circle the centre of Tokyo. Mini Japanese lesson over, we return to the game. The test version, currently running in one arcade in Tokyo, had us racing five characters, although the final version should have more, as well as newer cars based on the latest Japanese GT models.

The game runs on Namco's System 246 board, which provides solid enough visuals. The metallic sheen of the cars is particularly accentuated, with a heavy dose of polish over realism. The memory-card save feature is another element that *Wangan Midnight* delicately lifts from its competitor – a magnetic strip card is given to the player after their first game which retains their name, driver level and 'horse power', attained by investing both time and financial resources in the machine – another compulsive (and potentially economically devastating) factor which will be familiar to all those addicted to Sega's take on the duelling racer genre.





Like *Initial D*, *Wangan Midnight* prefers arcade-style driving to *Gran Turismo*'s realistic grind, more fitting to its shiny, exuberant aesthetic

Virtua Fighter Cyber Generation

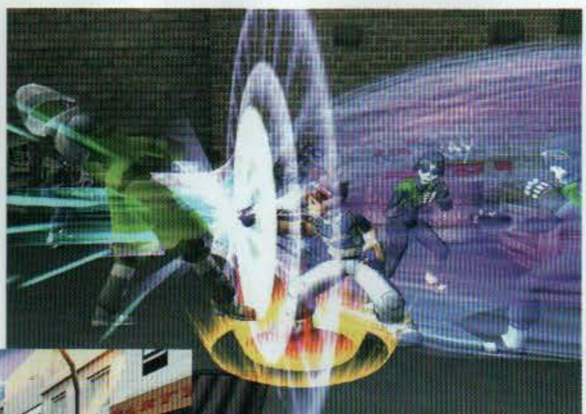
Format: GC, PS
Publisher: Seg
Developer: In-hous
Origin: Japa
Release: Summer (Japan), TBC (UK

Virtua Fighter RPG – in development for almost as long as the elusive Galleon, but much more secretive – finally heads towards a release...

When Yu Suzuki announced GameCube *Virtua Fighter Quest*, most people presumed it would turn out to be the long-rumoured *Virtua Fighter* RPG – just as, when Suzuki-san left AM2, they presumed his long-time pet project had been called to a halt. Then, last December, Sega organised a private presentation of titles out before the end of its financial year. One of those games was *Virtua Fighter Quest*, no longer a GC exclusive and sporting a new name.

The game is still principally the same, being part RPG, part simplified fighting game, and aimed at young children. It takes place on the island of Acropolis, where the only fun is a virtual world called Nexus. Sei, a 14-year-old boy, is confronted by a group of henchmen from a powerful industrial group called Judgement Six, and it's up to him – along with his friend – to defeat them.

To fight his enemies, the hero uses two buttons, attack and jump, which produce moves based on *VF*'s most popular attacks. He can also apportion special attacks to three other buttons, but it's fair to say this isn't the most sophisticated fighting system ever. That's kind of Sega's point, because it's a game for kids – but it's not clear whether kids, who always want the biggest and the best, are going to buy into the idea of a dumbed-down punch-kick experience.





When an enemy is defeated, the hero earns points he can turn into money. That money can be used to customise the character, buying new fighting techniques. It's a system that could bring some complexity to the overall package





Cyber Generation's bad guys, industrialists Judgement Six, are the creators of Dural – a throwback to earlier *Virtua Fighter* titles

Prescreen Alphas This month's announcements and updates...

Dead or Alive Online

Format: Xbox
Publisher: Tecmo
Developer: Team Ninja





A combination of *Dead or Alive* and *Dead or Alive 2* enhanced with online play via Live, all running on a modified *DOAX* engine. You'll know what to expect from this by now, surely...

Metal Slug

Format: Vodafone mobile
Publisher: SNK Playmore
Developer: In-house





Many games on mobiles are translations of arcade hits, but they're usually *Pac-Man* or *Space Invaders* clones, not SNK conversions. Here's the company's legendary shooter

Ninja Gaiden

Format: Xbox
Publisher: Tecmo
Developer: Team Ninja





From the arcade and NES to the Xbox, stylish ninja killing looks like being mixed with puzzles and platforming and the opportunity to play the earlier versions you discover along the way

Shin Megami Tensei III NOCTURNE

Format: PS2
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: In-house





The *Shin Megami Tensei* series is well regarded among Japanese otaku, and this PlayStation2 treatment is picking up excellent word of mouth in the territory. It's stylish-looking stuff

Virtua Racing Flat Out

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-house





You played it in the arcade and loved it. You played it on 32X and thought it wasn't bad. You played it on Mega Drive and... well, yes. Here's the coin-op on PS2 as part of the Ages range

Pacific Theatre of Operations IV

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Koei
Developer: In-house





Well established in Japan, the *PTO* series abandons Koei's medieval timeframe for some straightforward Second World War strategy battling. Spies, trade and subs all play a part

Combat Elite: WWII Paratroopers

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Acclaim
Developer: BattleBorne





The first fruit of Acclaim's publishing deal with BattleBorne, *Combat Elite* is a *Commandos*-style wargame with twoplayer, same-screen co-op gameplay and an emphasis an authenticity

Hitman Contracts

Format: PS2, Xbox, GC
Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Developer: IO Interactive





Drawing on a strong heritage, both in terms of proven engine-making skills and the shady past of Agent 47, the third installment hopes to add psychological depth to the gory blood slicks





Hyper Street Fighter II The Anniversary Edition

Before we fell in love with 3D fistfights, before polygonal blows took out the pixel, there was Street Fighter II, and now it's back on PlayStation2. Listen…,

Some audio cues in some videogames are unmistakable. Think about when Mario touches a power-up, when Link opens a chest, when Pac-Man dissolves, when Sonic hits a ring. *Street Fighter II* has countless evocative, memorable, utterly unmistakable audio cues, from Capcom's signature bell to the chirp of another Hadoken from Ryu to the sound the announcer makes as he's counting down and you're walking away from the machine.

It's because anyone who was interested in fighting games in the nineties will have played *Street Fighter II* countless times. So many times, in fact, that every audio bullet is helplessly committed to memory. The opening bars of the title theme, a player being selected and the whoosh of the plane, a "Ti-ger upp'rc't"…

Capcom is currently celebrating *Street Fighter II*'s anniversary. There have been parties, toys, books and articles far longer than this one. There are mobile phone straps, collectible sets of anniversary figures, and even a tribute album. The focus of the celebration, however, is a new *Street Fighter II* game, which collects all the game's previous releases and characters into one mighty PS2 compendium of street fighting.

Conforming to the series' stereotype of having over-complex names (a long-standing joke which Funamizu-san, the architect of the original, is more than aware of, see The Making of *SFII* in **E**108), the game is called *Hyper Street Fighter II: The Anniversary Edition*. And it gathers bits and pieces from the following…

- Format: **PlayStation2**
- Publisher: **Capcom**
- Developer: **In-house**
- Origin: **Japan**
- Release: **TBC**





Vega (or M Bison, as he may be renamed in the western release) versus DeeJay and Bison (again: possibly Balrog) versus Dhalsim. We know who our money's on in each contest



Street Fighter II: The World Warriors (1991)

In which the player has to choose between the original eight protagonists for the first time, picks their favourite and learns to fight to their strengths.

Default fighters Ryu and Ken are identical martial artists here, ensuring evenly matched twoplayer fights for those who wish for them. Sonic boom-flinging Guile is the third most-popular character, while Chun Li's speed and wall jump make up for her lack of range attacks. While Dhalsim's long reach is initially appealing, his slow speed is a weakness. Zangief is a little more than a joke to street fighting primitives, but mid-skill players obsess over his spinning pile-driver, the most powerful move in the game.





Icons in the corners of the screen reveal which version of which character is being used. Irrespective of the fighting action, the backgrounds retain the classic Capcom layouts

Judicious use of E Honda's Hundred-Hand Slap annihilates enemies up close. Blanka's electric attack is the most spectacular special move, coursing voltage illumating each character's custom-drawn skeleton.

Street Fighter II: Champion Edition

Also known as *Street Fighter II'* (1991), in which, due to popular demand and in response to a variety of illegitimate hacks, Capcom added code to let players fight as the bosses: M Bison, Balrog, Sagat and Vega. It's also the first model of the game to allow the same fighters to fight each other, two different costumes for each character beginning *Street Fighter*'s clone wars.

This allows Capcom to differentiate Ryu and Ken, adding superficially small (but ultimately fundamental) touches to their special moves which make default fighters proclaim their loyalty to one or the other. Other fighters gain extra moves, backgrounds are retouched, and a new title sequence is introduced, but the most major change is in the damage relating to some attacks. *Dash*, to give it its colloquial name amongst the hardcore fighters, weights combos over special moves.

Street Fighter II Turbo: Hyper Fighting

Also known as *Street Fighter II': Hyper Fighting* (1992), in which Capcom gives its popular franchise one final outing on the aging CPS1 board in an attempt to counter the ever-increasing number of pirate copies.

The biggest change in *Hyper Fighting* is the speed, which now runs at what seems like a thousand light punches a second. Some of the fighters are blessed with more moves, the most notable being the introduction of Chun Li's fireball and Dhalsim's Yoga Teleport. Mid-air specials also make their first (legal) appearance, along with still more colour schemes and another new title sequence.

Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers (1993)

In which Capcom transfers the series to CPS2 and celebrates with the introduction of super special moves and four new fighters. Cammy is Guile's British daughter and trades weak, spindly attacks for extra speed. T Hawk is a big, slow American Indian, and might prove to be the least successful character in the series if it weren't for the charmless DeeJay, a Jamaican kickboxer designed by staff at Capcom's US studio. Fei-Long is the final addition, a tribute to Bruce Lee, and the game is rushed out – with a few changes to portraits, backgrounds, and that ever-morphing title sequence – to meet the challenge of Midway's *Mortal Kombat 2*.

Super Street Fighter II Turbo

Also known as *Super Street Fighter II X* (1994), in which Capcom finishes



Art of boxing

As one of the longest-running games series of all time, *Street Fighter II* has been converted to countless formats in countless guises. Do any of these boxes ring bells?






風林火山



the *Street Fighter II* series by adding all the things they intended to add to *The New Challengers* in the first place, before the rush to counter *Kombat* forced them to finish early. Mostly this means the addition of Gouki (Akuma in the west), a new boss character who fights in the style of Ken and Ryu, and who is only playable with a cheat code. Alongside his introduction there's some new art, of course, another new title sequence, and the inexplicable absence of the inter-round bonus games that have been with the series since the start.

Which brings us up to date

Hyper Street Fighter II: The Anniversary Edition is not simply a collection of ports, not a rehash of the *Street Fighter Collections* that were released for PlayStation in 1997 and 1998. It takes all the characters from all five of the versions, and combines them in a single, fast, flawless engine. In singleplayer, the player selects their character first, then their preference for era, be it the original, *Dash*, *Turbo*, *Super* or *X*. *Street Fighter II*, however, isn't a singleplayer game, and it's in multiplayer that previously unarguable scores are settled. Pairs of fighting fans who've evolved into this millennium with *Soul Calibur* and *Virtua Fighter* can slip back in time, and see a squarely matched Ryu and Ken square off for the first time since '91. Then they go trans-temporal: a Blanka from '94, supercharged with a Super special move of electric fury, goes up against his original green incarnation. Gouki takes on old-school Bison, Cammy hits it off with Vega, still swan-diving from his Spanish background. Chun-Li with fireballs fights Chun-Li without. Chun-Li wins.

"Fighting fans who've evolved with *Soul Calibur* and *Virtua Fighter* can slip back in time, and see a squarely matched Ryu and Ken square off for the first time since '91"







Capcom's interpretation of the Northern Lights in *Super* was infamous for use of what might be termed artistic licence



Dragon Punch versus Hundred Hand Slap – a formidable test of skills between two legends

If you can't see why any of this is a big deal, you were probably never a *Street Fighter II* fan in the first place; or at least not the sort of fan who instinctively twitches a quarter rotation of punch as soon as you touch a joystick. Beyond that, though, you might not be able to see why it's a big deal simply because it's actually, really, not. The possibilities on offer here are minor thrills, and the gimmick kick is in seeing a simple, nostalgic 'What if...' eloquently answered. The dynamic behind the inter-game play, though, is much more than a gimmick.

Hyper Street Fighter II is the celebration of an anniversary of the most crucial era in videogame fighting there's ever been, a time in which Capcom refined the street fighting ideal and created a single line of evolution for the beat 'em up. The graphics are pale, now, and the sound iconic but one-dimensional. Doesn't matter. The movement, reaction and interaction of the characters is everything, and that's still as sharp as ever. It's not a game so much as a document, and it covers *Street Fighter II*, nothing more. All it takes to remind you just how important that is?

Just listen.



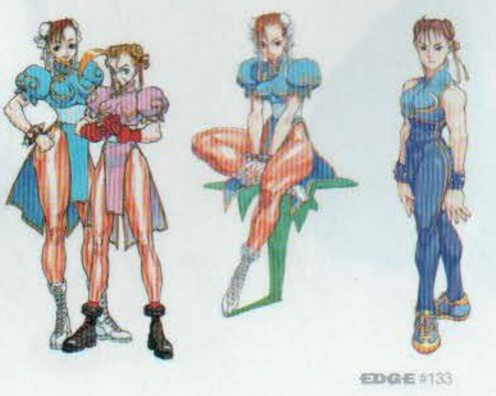






T Hawk's dive was perhaps his most effective move – although that's picking from an unimpressive repertoire. As you'd expect, various character colours can be chosen











Linkography:
http://www.klov.com/
http://www.arcade-history.com/
http://www.gamefaqs.com/
http://www.play-asia.com/



Lost in music

It's a games console, see, not a Trojan horse that brings a digital hub into your living room. That's what Microsoft said...













They were suspicious, of course. *They* always are when it comes to Microsoft. The company incurs suspicion every time it so much as breathes out a press release, let alone makes a major business decision to move into a new economic sector.

The Xbox, *they* said, had nothing to do with videogaming. It was a move towards an entertainment hub, which was a move towards Microsoft controlling your living room, which was a move towards Microsoft controlling the world, the oceans and God Himself. All Microsoft could do was repeat its mantra: "It's all about the games. It's all about the games. It's all about the games. It's all about…"

The karaoke. This Christmas, Microsoft released *Xbox Music Mixer*, billed as: "The ultimate in digital entertainment for the twenty-first century." Notably, there's no reference to gaming in that sentence, but fear not, because there is in this, also lifted from the official website's blurb: "Take Xbox's already awesome gaming" – there we go – "and DVD capabilities, and add in *Xbox Music Mixer* to unleash an entirely new category of digital entertainment." You can look at pictures, show movies and sing karaoke.

In other words, it's exactly the digital hub *they* feared. Ironic, considering many of *them* worked on *Xbox Media Player*, a program for chipped Xboxes which, over a year ago, was doing most of what *Xbox Music Mixer* does. Maybe the hackers' work encouraged Microsoft to move in this direction. Maybe Sony's PSX – an explicit attempt at bringing the PS2 into the living rooms of people who don't play games – made the move more urgent. Maybe more likely, particularly if you ask *them*, they've been planning it all along.

Or is it all just over-reaction, steeped in anti-Bill propaganda and reactionary screaming from luddites? Console karaoke add-ons are old news, around since *Karaoke Studio* on the NES and maybe before. Sega released a karaoke add-on for the Dreamcast not that long ago, there've been DVD-based plugins more recently for the PS2, and this year Sony's official singing game *Singstar* will go up against Konami's *Karaoke Stage* and Jaleco's long-standing *Dream Audition*.

Will the movement's westernisation turn consoles into something more than just games machines? And if it does, how will it affect gaming? We await your correspondence. And *theirs* too, obviously.





Land ahoy

Lara Croft creator Toby Gard's ship is finally coming in: Confounding Factor's Galleon will be released by SCi in May. But can it conquer seven years' worth of expectation?

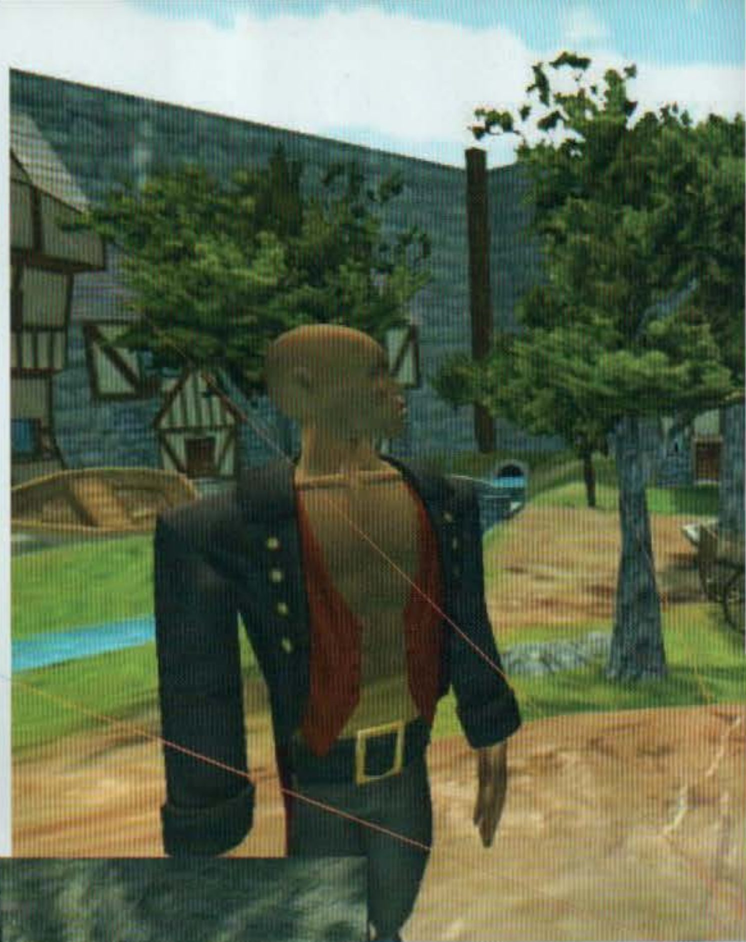
Difficult second album syndrome is a phenomenon defined by The Stone Roses. Appearing almost out of nowhere to release their incredible debut, they were instantly acclaimed as the best British band since the Beatles. Which is where it all started to go wrong. First there were the record company wranglings. Then came drugs, disillusionment and writer's block. As the years passed, expectation snowballed to the point where, whatever the band actually released, it would be impossible to live up to the increasingly mythical status assumed by their debut. Finally, key members quit and, submerged by misplaced hype, 'The Second Coming' was eventually released and made to seem irrelevant by the emergence of Oasis.

Toby Gard has difficult second album syndrome, and it's not labouring a point to compare his story with that of Manchester's finest. No one had heard of him prior to the overwhelming success of *Tomb Raider* (on which Gard was lead designer, and is widely credited with siring one Lara Croft). Creative differences with Core ensued, so Gard struck out on his own to form Confounding Factor. After *Tomb Raider*, greatness was expected, and the weight of expectation transferred to Gard's new project, *Galleon*. In the atmosphere of optimism that accompanied the videogame industry in the boom years of the late 1990s, everything seemed possible.

Then *Galleon* ran aground. Years passed. We saw tantalising glimpses of a game that never appeared close to completion. There may have been no drug hell revelations, but disillusionment and the game development equivalent of writer's block (a malfunctioning game engine) were

- Format: **Xbox**
- Publisher: **SCi**
- Developer: **Confounding Factor**
- Origin: **UK**
- Release: **May 2004**





Boss encounters put *Galleon*'s experimental camera and movement system to the sword. The game emerges unscathed and triumphant



certainly apparent. Then a key member quit (Paul Douglas, Confounding Factor co-founder, left in 2000). Now *Galleon* has been in production longer even than 'The Second Coming' and, while a release date is finally in sight, the dangers of irrelevance are obvious. For Oasis, read *Prince Of Persia: The Sands of Time*. What fate *Galleon* and Gard now?

Just walking into Confounding Factor's Bristol offices is disheartening. There are workstations for more than 20 people here, yet the studio's staff has been reduced to a skeleton of six. To Gard's absolute credit, though, he remains proud of his company. He is frank about his difficult experiences over the last seven years and retains a sense of humour about the situation, even if it sometimes borders on the fatalistic.

His comments back in 1998 about wanting a "Ferrari for every toe" have been taken out of context since, but were obviously uttered with heavy sarcasm – Gard has always been in this for the love of game development rather than its fleeting rewards.

Contrast this with the attitude of the people who really did get rich off Lara Croft, Jeremy and Adrian Smith, last seen boasting about their wealth in 'Loaded' just before they were dumped by Eidos.

"We took a wrong turn with technology," shrugs Gard with a smile, aware of his understatement. *Galleon*'s entire script was written before development began, and because the script cleverly refers to aspects of the gameplay, almost the complete process of every level was mapped out and ready way back in 1998.

"But when it came to the most important aspect of the game – character movement – we didn't really get that quite right first time around and had to restart," explains Gard. "Personally I feel that it's crucial in an adventure game to be able to move around and explore the environment without feeling limited in what I can see and do. So two years into the development of the game we had to tear up the control and movement system and start again. That took another year. And by that time people were saying that the game looked out of date, so we had to redo the graphics. Then, when we had it looking all plush and nice, the game was running too slowly!" Gard cracks himself up at this point, in acknowledgement of the total ludicrousness of the situation he found himself in. "The frame rate was too slow, so we had to rewrite the engine. And that brings you pretty much up to date."

So the reality is actually fairly mundane. Most games suffer setbacks like this during their development, but Confounding Factor's team was just too small to cope. "To be honest, I got it completely wrong from the start about the way things needed to be



done. I wanted a small team to keep it pure and simple, but it soon became clear we needed more staff and a proper management structure."

With Gard working as lead designer and managing director, his time was compromised. Having received his funding based on the original small team size proposal, there was no further investment to expand. "If you get your business plan wrong you're screwed, basically. All we could do was sit there and work as hard as we could. Which took years."

Only the belief that they were making a good, different and important game kept Gard and the five remaining Confounding Factor staff going through the last few difficult years. And it's true – *Galleon* does boast many impressive features, the best of which is the character movement and control. The acknowledgement that clumsy character and camera control systems provide a barrier to player enjoyment in many thirdperson action games was Gard's initial impetus when creating *Galleon*.

The result is a mechanic that is hard to explain at first, but which rapidly becomes second nature to play after experiencing the game's thorough training missions. For the most part you are not moving your character, Captain Rhama, himself but the camera around him, pointing it at the desired destination on the landscape and then pushing Rhama towards it. The fluidity of character movement using this system is glorious, and there's no chance of becoming



The game engine cut-scenes may not be visually stunning but they are impressively animated and voice-acted, lending the game a distinctive comic fantasy feel influenced by the Sinbad movies

stuck on scenery or not being able to turn quickly enough in combat. This fluidity is aided by analogue control over Rhama's speed of movement, from creeping to sprinting and anywhere in between. At a cautious pace Rhama cannot fall off narrow planks, and if he jumps he lands gracefully so long as you time the action correctly. Gard wa keen to eradicate all of the typical platform game frustrations without simplifying the challenge. To demonstrate this thinking, he shows us a level set inside an enormous cavern, with a vertiginous pathway of planks, ladders, platforms and pulleys leading to the top. We proceed cautiously, inching along narrow ledges and lining up jumps precisely. When Gard takes the controls, he attacks the same route at three times the speed, leaping across chasms with abandon, sprinting and jumping instead of creeping and climbing. The idea is that once you have mastered Rhama's controls, you can almost fly through certain sections with nonchalant assurance.

Rhama can grip certain types of rocks, climbing like Spider-Man or even performing his own interpretation of the 'Matrix' wall-run if moving fast enough. He can also swim, with strokes as fluid as his land-based movement. In terms of satisfying thirdperson character movement, *Galleon* is everything that *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* should have been.

However, you can't help feeling that Confounding Factor's dedication to this aspect of the game has been at the expense of innovation in other areas, such as the texturing of environments or imaginative level design. Things have moved on since *Galleon* was first conceived – the game's entire level scripting was completed within the first few months of development, remember – and some of *Galleon*'s set-piece ideas have since become clichés. A boss level where Rhama is required to defeat a giant, lumbering beast by leaping onto his back and attacking its weak spot comes across as a weak facsimile of similar scenarios from *Devil May Cry*. A clever puzzle involving levers, pulleys and a windmill may seem passé for *Ico* lovers. And is a game about pirates, however good the script and the character acting, going to excite an audience seemingly fixated on war and crime-based titles? Maybe if *Galleon* had docked somewhere between Johnny Depp's 'Pirates Of The Caribbean'

"You are not moving your character himself but the camera around him, pointing it at the desired destination on the landscape and then pushing Rhama towards it"



Luckily for a ship's captain, Rhama can swim. Some levels require underwater exploration or a race to dry land after a shipwreck, requiring you to navigate currents with an eye on the oxygen gauge

Shipping news
Galleon's seven-year saga

1996
The original epoch-making *Tomb Raider* game is released late in the year to instant acclaim and success, thrusting previously unknown Core staffers Toby Gard and Paul Douglas (lead designer and lead programmer respectively) into the spotlight.

1997
As *Tomb Raider* continues to sell in vast quantities and Lara Croft becomes an international phenomenon, Core makes plans for a sequel. In June, Gard is interviewed about Lara by 'The Face', wryly crediting Lara's "enormous oojahs" to a "slip of the mouse". However, frustrated by the creative stasis forced upon them by the Croft marketing machine, Gard and Douglas hand in their resignations before the year's end.

1998
After rejecting Cambridge, Oxford and Exeter, Gard and Douglas establish Confounding Factor in Bristol, taking a couple of other ex-Core employees with them. *Galleon* is officially revealed by **Edge** in August (**E**61), when Gard claims (with sarcasm, it should be noted) that his personal ambition is to have a "a Ferrari for every toe."

1999
Galleon – a PC-only game at this point – is signed by Interplay, but the first slated release date comes and goes with barely a whisper.



2000
Paul Douglas leaves Confounding Factor. *Galleon* is now mooted for release on everything from Dreamcast to PS2 and is also lined up as a potential GameCube launch title. An E3 no-show prompts Interplay to push the release date back into 2001.

2001
Edge revisits Confounding Factor for a *Galleon* preview (**E**97). Platform is still TBC, but the enthusiastic tone of the feature hints that a release is imminent. "Things just became more complicated," is all Gard reveals about the delays at this point. Titus completes its takeover of Interplay but fails to arrest the publisher's decline.

2002
Galleon appears at E3 but it's hidden away on Interplay's stand and is still evidently unfinished. Time passes. Ice ages come and go.

2003
Galleon's Captain Rhama graces the cover of 'XGamer' in January, suggesting that a final platform decision has been made. An autumn release date is quoted but, unsurprisingly, it proves to be ambitious once again. The troubled Interplay is forced to abandon all support for the project, but SCi sends out the lifeguards, picking up worldwide rights to *Galleon* and installing a final, final, we-promise-it-for-definite-this-time release date of May 2004 for what is now an Xbox-only game.





Rhama's objectives don't become clear until story events unfold, but game engine cut-scenes ensure the flow isn't disrupted





Photography: **Brett Caines**

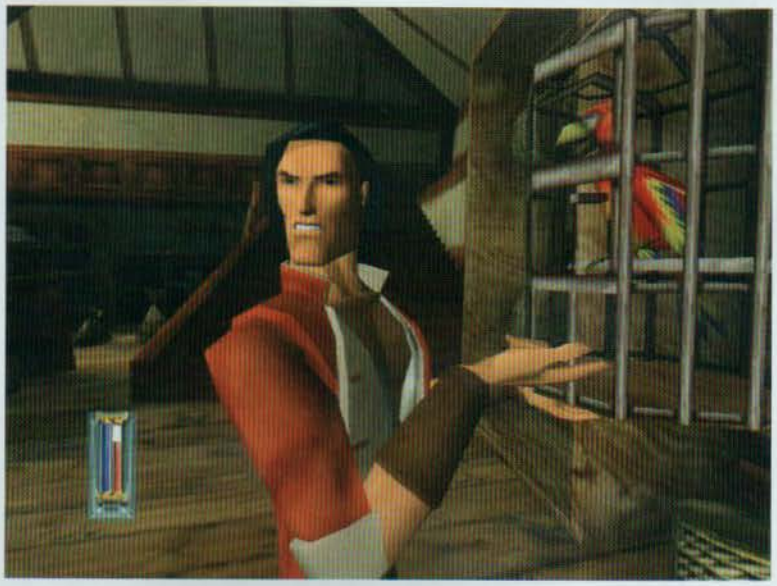








These screenshots all depict scenes from early levels of the game, although the Confounding Factor team promises 30 hours of gameplay



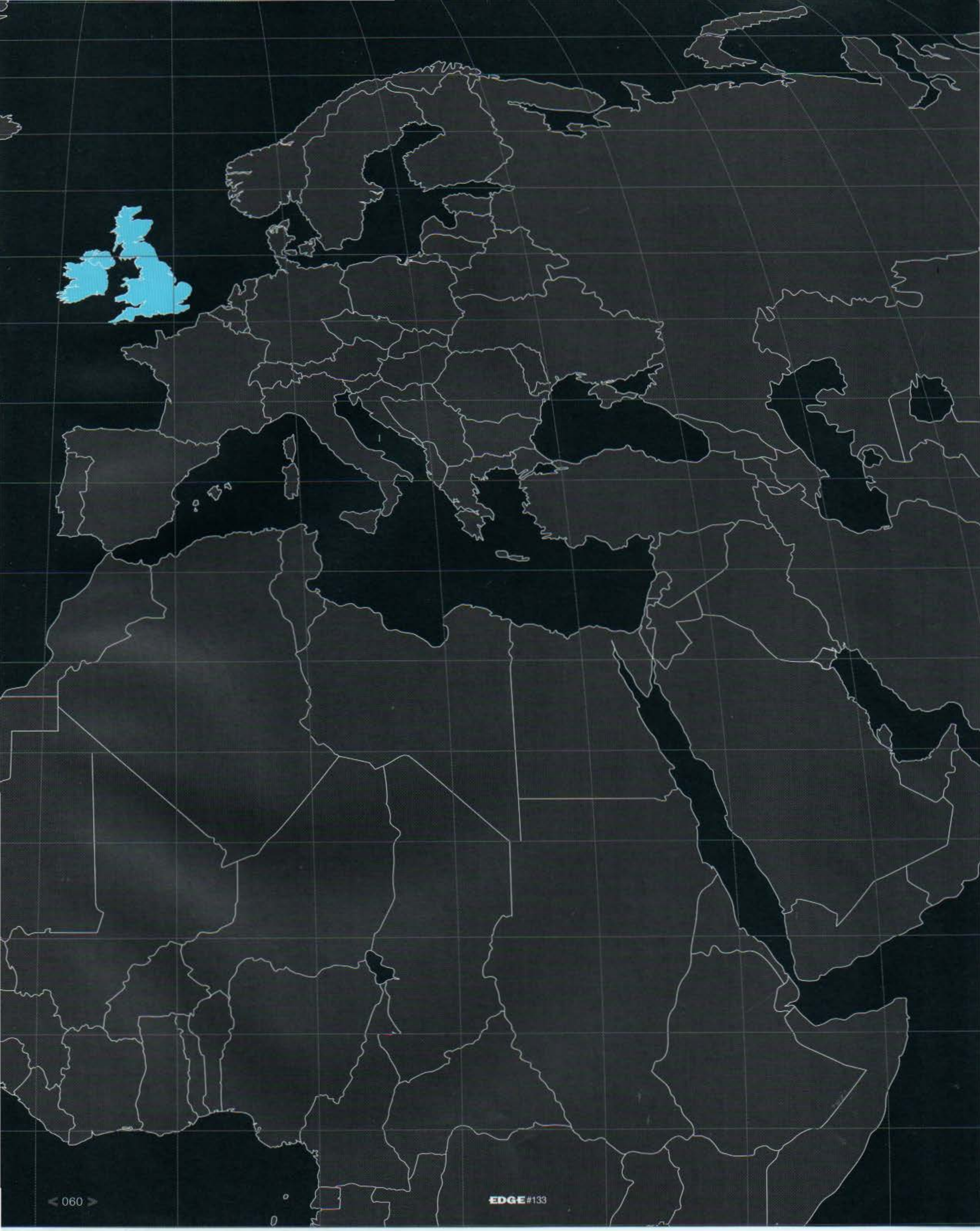
and Russell Crowe's 'Master And Commander' then it might have surfed a brief seafaring zeitgeist, but that particular marketing opportunity has now been missed, too.

There seem to be many coincidental similarities between *Galleon* and *Prince Of Persia*, except that UbiSoft's title has beaten *Galleon* to launch. "If you describe them in synopsis format then, yeah, the two games probably do appear quite similar," concedes Gard. "If you look deeper, in *Prince Of Persia* there is a prescribed correct route for passing through each area. It's a shopping list of movements. The amount of freedom that you have to move around in *Galleon* makes it an entirely different game. I'm sure there's room for both *Galleon* and *Prince Of Persia* in people's collections. Ultimately, you know that when developing any game it's possible that another company will beat you to the punch with some similar ideas, but you've got to be confident that your game can stand up by itself."

Prince Of Persia hasn't really sold in the numbers envisioned by its publisher. However good *Galleon* turns out to be, in the final analysis there's a danger that tastes will have moved on. "Sure, contemporary, crime-based games are popular right now," says Gard. "It's not really any different to movies, where the majority are realistic and contemporary but you do get fantasy movies that are successful. And, to be honest, I just wanted to make a pirate game, and I didn't want to take the safe option." Does he think gamers' tastes are diversifying? "Let's hope so, eh? Otherwise we might as well all give up and stop designing games…"

You can't blame him for feeling a little resigned. Asked about his final hopes for *Galleon*, he's long since stopped talking sales figures. "I just hope that people like it. That's all I can ask for after all this time." No major regrets about forging that independent path? "Hmmm. No, no I don't think so. It's been hard for everyone here, it's been a learning experience but we've come out of it knowing a lot more and being a lot mature in our ideals. I doubt that I'd have learned anywhere near as much had I stayed at Core."

It's hoped that all of *Galleon*'s fresh ideas and clever touches come to the fore in the final code, and that the final graphical polishes can do justice to the game's epic atmosphere and storyline. **Edge** also hopes it proves popular, for Confounding Factor's sake and all small development studios of its kind. Somewhere in *Galleon*'s troubled genesis lies a cautionary tale about the dangers of detaching the creative process from the harsh economic realities of game development.



Different strokes

It's a well-worn stereotype that Japanese consumers find western games rough, characterless and unfriendly. So what can publishers do to break the east? Edge travelled to Dundee to find out...

Here's a stark statistic for you: in 2001, only three non-Japanese games made it on to Japan's list of 50 top-selling titles, two of them British and one Canadian. And at the time of writing things have not improved. Of the top 100 selling games in Japan in the first half of 2003, only five were developed in the west: *Ratchet & Clank* (22), *James Bond 007: NightFire* (57), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (71), *Metroid Prime* (72) and *Enter the Matrix* (99).

Japan, on the other hand, did a much better job of selling its games to the west. According to the latest figures, more than 30 per cent of the games sold in the UK originate in Japan. In Europe as a whole the figure is closer to 22 per cent, with 33 per cent in the US.

The UK export figures are so disappointing that last year's Department of Trade and Industry study into the competitiveness of the UK games industry, 'From Exuberant Youth to Sustainable Maturity,' came to some gloomy conclusions: "Clearly, the Japanese market is largely closed to foreign games," the study stated. "There is little that the UK developers can do to change this. Opening it up is a job for publishers, but UK publishers lack scale so are unlikely to be able to do this."

It's now more important than ever for publishers to make their games appeal to players in all the key territories. However, there's much more to videogame cultural acceptance than dubbing in the appropriate language. It's one of the main reasons why the International Centre for Computer Games and Virtual Entertainment (IC CAVE) was established at the University of Abertay, Dundee.

Part-funded by Scottish Enterprise and the DTI, the facility is a research and development centre. Its primary focus is on the videogames and digital entertainment industry, with a secondary focus on the application of games technology in other areas like healthcare, life science, engineering and learning.





Lucy Joyner, a researcher at IC CAVE, has been looking at the ways players from different continents approach, play and consume their games. For too long, cultural stereotypes have been encouraging developers to adapt their games for overseas markets in specific ways. Joyner and her colleagues wanted to see if there was any evidence to support such strongly held beliefs. "With less free time, we found that [Japanese] teenagers choose not to play games that put them under more pressure to compete," says Joyner. An interesting adjunct to this is that levels of competitiveness seemed to be different from one side of the globe to the other.

Joyner wanted to test her theory. In one of the most dramatic experiments to date, IC CAVE researchers put test side of the track leaving them to triumphantly sweep across the finishing line to ultimate victory.

This was just one of the experiments IC CAVE has conducted. One of its main aims was to answer one of the key questions facing western developers and publishers: what makes Japanese gamers tick? After thousands of hours of research, the people at IC CAVE are less pessimistic than the DTI. They are now partway through building up a detailed profile of Japanese gameplaying that could help give western developers and publishers the edge they need to cross cultures and break into the lucrative Japanese market.

The key question is why gamers in Japan and the west play videogames in the first place. Joyner and her colleagues



Research involving *Ridge Racer V* trials showed striking differences between Japanese and Scottish teen players in terms of approach

"Whenever one managed a particularly skilful manoeuvre and slipped into the lead, he would slow down again. More often than not, both players crossed the finishing line together"

groups of Japanese teenagers in front of *Ridge Racer V*. What they discovered was startling: whenever one managed a particularly skilful manoeuvre and slipped into the lead, he would slow down again to let his opponent catch up alongside. More often than not, both players crossed the finishing line together, a close-knit team.

"They shared, they empathised, they whooped for each other. It was nice," says Joyner. 'Niceness' was the last thing she had expected, but it led to further revelations. The same test was then carried out with groups of Scottish teenagers, and normal service was resumed. They raced each other into the ground, whooping only when their opponents crashed into the

conducted surveys, counted the coins in arcade machines and watched as Japanese teenagers were wired up to heart monitors to find out which games really set their pulses racing. Chief among the motivating factors they found were community – the need to belong – and competition – the need to win. In Japan, they found, community was the key.

One of the first things they noticed after stepping off the plane in Japan was the amount of gaming action still taking place in arcades: "We saw large groups of teenagers socialising with each other. Parents with small children were interacting with other parents and their small children. Time in arcades appeared to be spent meeting, socialising and sharing gaming rather than



Researcher Lucy Joyner from IC CAVE (HQ, left) is challenging cultural stereotypes with her work on the way games are played. The study has shown how players' levels of competitiveness differ across the world. It's compelling stuff for developers attempting to help their games travel





The main monitoring console at IC CAVE allows the postures, hand movements and interactions of players to be recorded. The controller can zoom in on individual players and split the screen to watch them alongside the game. Right: Kimi Hoshino



Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles **is a game that encourages teamwork through the cunning device of making one member carry the crystal around**

playing alone or competing against one other person." Not the most unexpected discovery, but by the end of its research, the IC CAVE team had found that Japanese 14- to 15-year-olds were four times more likely to crowd into arcades for their regular game fix than their British counterparts. Not surprisingly, the arcade owners went out of their way to cater for their clientele. There were mini-arcade machines, low enough for a ten-year-old to reach the controls. Other games included multiplayer opportunities for adults and children – with the parent sitting at the front of a canoe-shaped machine with his kids 'paddling away' close behind.

Care for the community

Japanese developers had plenty of other community-building techniques beyond simple arcade design. *Pokémon* famously took the world by storm by dominating every communications medium going – television, colouring books, clothing brands and collecting cards after the establishment of the videogame.

In the west, community and cooperation were way down the list of gameplayers' priorities. IC CAVE found that, when it came to UK players, it was competition and not community that ruled. The typical scenario was the lone gamer in his bedroom rather than the family outing to the arcade. British gamers did invite their friends round, but only after they'd practiced the game so much they knew they'd win. Many of the 14- to 15-year-olds interviewed admitted to spending hours alone at their consoles, honing skills and perfecting the moves that they would later use to humiliate their schoolmates.

According to the IC CAVE study: "Games help [UK] children recognise their skills, abilities and the enjoyment of being good at something. Being good at a game can provide players with an almost cult status amongst peers as they demonstrate their skills to their friends and are revered for them." In other words, canoe-shaped arcade cabinets and collecting cards are fair enough, but what that the average western gamer wants above all else is a game they can win. So where does all this leave the game developers who have conquered the west but now want to be big in Japan?

Japanese games have always appealed to the tastes of western gamers, partly because of their high technical excellence, but mainly due to their exotic flavour. Strangely, the love affair has generally been one way. Perhaps unfairly, the perception of western-developed games among Japanese players is that they lack polish and character. While we find 'all c your bases are belong to us'-style Japlish mistakes in eastern-translated games charming, the Japanese are less forgiving when *Enter the Matrix* hits Tokyo stores with a set of poorly thought-out subtitles.

Of course, there's a harsh irony to the research conducted on behalf of the DTI: while western publishers are desperate to break the Japanese market to maximise sales, that very same Japanese market is currently in a slump. Nevertheless, the research conducted by IC CAVE and put into everyday practice by localisation companies like Babel Media is an important stepping stone towards global understanding of the videogame market. No one has all the answers yet, but it's clear that comprehending a few underlying cultural differences can give companies the edge in an increasingly competitive arena.

Life and SOUL

Joyner and the IC CAVE researchers are still working out the ful implications of their research. Earlier this year they opened the Scottish Usability Lab (SOUL), the UK's first games 'usability' centre in Dundee, to test games against a wide range of cultura and design-led factors. It has also agreed to share a few pointers that any ambitious western game developer and publisher should keep in mind if they want to cross that cultural divide (go to www.iccave.com/web/site/services/soul.asp for

further reading on IC CAVEs research). **Edge** also asked **Kimi Hoshino** of Tokyo-based games consultancy Media Create (www.m-create.com) to contribute. These are some:

Local issues

Localise every aspect of the game you can – the language, the street names and the background scenery. "If you want your customers to enjoy your game, you have to make sure that the content is meaningful to them," asserts Joyner.

Gamers interviewed in her study had a horrible time playing one car racing game because the names of the game levels did not make sense in their language. They were also frustrated because they could not recognise the background scenery.

IC CAVE tactfully declined to name the offending game. Hoshino-san, on the other hand, was less reticent about naming and shaming the recent Japanese edition of *Enter the Matrix*. "The Japanese subtitles were not matched to the actual gameplay – some lagged far behind," he explains. In fact, the subtitles blacked out the bottom of the screen, blocking players' views of gauges and graphics. Not a brilliant way to make your potential Japanese customer welcome. "It seems to me that overseas publishers tend to release products as they are and do not seem to take proper care of proper localisation procedures as the Japanese publishers do."

The need for this sort of cultural adjustment is already fuelling a burgeoning game-localisation industry, led by companies like the UK-based Babel Media.

Community service

Adding community-building features is important if you're going to tap into the Japanese psyche. IC CAVE researchers observed groups of Japanese university students playing *Soul Calibur II*. Just like in the *Ridge Racer V* trials, what would have been a competition-fuelled shouting match in the west turned into a heart-warming community event in Japan.

The community 'feel,' says the IC CAVE research, is built into the game itself. "In these experiments, undergraduate students preferred to play individually against the game AI while the others shared in the experience by vocalising support and empathy for the player," says Joyner. "Playing this way, each player received statistics about their game performance and these statistics were discussed and ranked. Thus there was competition, and an overall winner, but it was indirect competition between the players, as each person's experience playing against the game AI was different."

The importance of a strong oneplayer mode was reinforced when the undergraduates were wired up to a heart monitor – they proved to be much more excited playing against the AI than a flesh-and-blood opponent. In the multiplayer game they tended to hold back to avoid beating or humiliating a friend.

Japanese developers have made imaginative use of consoles and gameplay to increase the community feel. Square Enix's *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* for the GameCube also lets four players join in on their Game Boy Advances. Teamwork is central to the gameplay, as one of the four players has to spend most of the time carrying a crystal, leaving him dependent on the others for attack and defence. Other notable examples include Namco's *Pac-Man Vs* (see page 103) and Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords*. Western developers, says Joyner, could also learn a lot from the merchandising muscle of games like *Pokémon* or the *Monster Rancher* series. "We need to look at how to extend the experience of the game beyond the actual console. Kids who haven't got a copy of the game can still join in by swapping the cards and watching the TV show." Telling small UK developers to compete head on with Nintendo's marketing department might seem a little… well, optimistic. But IC CAVE believes that there is no reason why western developers can't pick up a few tricks.





Crash Bandicoot had to be altered considerably for the Japanese market – but the cosmetic work and gameplay changes paid off

"Each player received statistics about their game performance and these statistics were discussed and ranked. Thus there was competition, and an overall winner, but it was indirect competition"

Focus not freedom

Grand Theft Auto III has seen some success in Japan, clocking up sales of around 300,000 copies. But given the game's unprecedented massmarket appeal in the west, this is still disappointing. According to Hoshino-san, this could be because it tries to do too much. The freedom of movement in the city, the smashing up of cars, the beating up of pedestrians – all the stuff that won it so many friends in London – apparently left many Tokyo players feeling overwhelmed.

"The overseas games tend to allow players to enjoy things other than game missions or objectives… but Japanese players do not enjoy this freedom," says Joyner, concluding that Japanese players often find sprawling worlds that offer almost unlimited freedom offputting.

During IC CAVEs research, the *Mario* games and the RPG *Dragon Warrior* both scored highly with Japanese gamers

Success story 1: Crash Bandicoot

One western game character who has made it big in Japan is Vivendi Universal's Crash Bandicoot. The *Crash* franchise has so far sold more than 29m copies worldwide, including over 1m units in the Japanese market.

Success has not come easily. All the major characters and settings had to have a complete makeover before they could take their place of honour in Tokyo's gaming charts. "For Crash to appeal to a Japanese audience he was essentially stripped of realistic details," says **Chris Ansell**, Vivendi Universal Games senior brand manager for Asia Pacific, who was involved in the localisation of the title in Japan.

That meant Crash's shaggy eyebrows, green eyes and unsightly hairy ears all had to go. "He had to look more 'cartoonish' – so he would appeal to the game's target audience, young Japanese gamers," Ansell explains.

The development team also had to make dramatic changes to the gameplay. "Level difficulty was another issue that we needed to address," says Ansell. "Western-made games set the difficulty level much higher than Japanese games from the first stage. If the level is too difficult from the beginning, Japanese gamers tend to get tired. Most console game players in Japan are the light users, so it is essential to start from an easy level so more people can join and enjoy the games. Japanese gamers feel western-made games can be 'unfriendly', not only because the level itself is difficult, but also because there are not enough hints in the game."

VUG's initial partner, Sony Computer Entertainment, helped out with the Japanese marketing effort (VUG's current Japanese partner is Konami). The company created a catchy theme tune and a special 'Crash Dance' for the TV commercials, again helping to target the key market – younger children.

In the end it all paid off, but not without a lot of extra effort. Western developers and publishers will always have a fight on their hands getting their brands accepted in Japan, reckons Ansell: "More than half of the titles in Japan market are from popular comic franchises. So it is very tough for western titles to have impact if they do not have an established fan base."

Success story 2: Ratchet & Clank

To illustrate how resistant Japanese consumers are to western-made games, only one such title made it into the top 50 sellers from the first half of 2003. That game was *Ratchet & Clank*.

It's perhaps no surprise that *Crash Bandicoot* and *Ratchet & Clank* (from closely associated developers Naughty Dog and Insomniac) have been the games to most successfully penetrate Japan, given that their cartoon stylings and dedication to playability were highly influenced by the Nintendo approach.

But that belittles the additional efforts from the Californian developers to consider the demands of a Japanese audience without compromising their appeal to western players.

"Even though game sales have been dropping in Japan over the last couple of years, it's still a huge market," explains Insomniac president **Ted Price**. "This means we do our best to ensure that our characters appeal to both Japanese and European consumers equally." So what's the secret? "There's no magic formula! Our Japanese producers, Ryoichi Hasegawa and Masahito Shimizu, had some great suggestions on how to tweak Ratchet's look for the Japanese audience – they were the ones who suggested stripes. As far as the game design went we didn't change anything for Japan. Although we did add a 'slow' camera option for all territories and this was a reaction to what we had learned about Japan from *Spyro*, in that fast-turning cameras are a no-no."

It seems that investment in character design over gameplay is the crucial factor that can sway a Japanese audience, and seemingly negligible tweaks in this department can be very significant.

"The characters on the posters and in the TV and magazine ads are drawn in a much more 'anime' style compared to those in the game," explains Price. "As you'd expect, the head-to-body ratio is increased. It seems that for platformers, the Japanese audience appreciates a younger, softer look."



***Ratchet & Clank*'s developers listened to Japanese advice and made certain their game would appeal to both a Japanese and western audience, both in terms of looks and gameplay as well as the way the game was promoted. Additional effort here results in more sales**

because of their clear and simple explanations of the game missions and objectives. "If you play any of the *Mario* games, you will understand missions and objectives just by looking at the screen. You can just pick up and play without reading manuals," agrees Hoshino-san. "In *Dragon Warrior*, players need to first speak to the king to hear the objectives and missions of the games; they are also forced to use all the commands available in the game in the first room and they cannot go out from the first room unless they go through all these procedures, which will allow the players to learn all the necessary parts – missions, objectives, things that are available for the players, etc – instantly."

baffled. And western developers would have to bury themselve in Japanese culture for years to copy some popular games types. The full historical and mythological subtleties of games li Koei's *Dynasty Warrior* series are beyond the understanding of most western players. Games based on obscure manga titles and styles are equally difficult to emulate. Some cultural bridges are just too tough to cross.

Difficult age

Getting the age-range right is also very important in the Japanese market. Gameplaying in Japan tends to drop off dramatically after leaving school. "Data from Japanese

> "The full historical and mythological subtleties of games like Koei's *Dynasty Warrior* series are beyond the understanding of most western players. Some cultural bridges are just too tough to cross"

Focus test

To crack Japan, you must first focus on the genres that work in Japan. According to the IC CAVE report, "It can be argued that the social aspects of gaming were so important to Japanese players that it constrained genre preferences and game selection." In the UK, gamers take on everything from firstperson shooters to flight simulators. In Japan, IC CAVE found only car racing, roleplaying and fighting games were played by at least 20 per cent of all participants.

Everything has its limits, however. Western developers can only go so far in trying to cater for Japanese tastes and genres. The cloying love-sim antics of *Tokimeki Memorial* and *Princess Maker* were huge hits in Japan, but left UK gamers alienated and

undergraduates indicated that gaming is not a major activity in their life," says IC CAVE's report, "with 80 per cent of students playing computer games once a month, or less."

IC CAVE's research suggests that many western-developed games are just too difficult for Japan, and the titles that have seen successful cross-cultural sales are the ones tha have been made easier, especially for a younger audience. According to Hoshino-san, "Japanese gameplayers prefer to play the game without getting stuck halfway through. The level of difficulty needs to be adjusted accordingly." Joyner agrees, echoing other findings: "With little free time… it is arguable that [Japanese] teenagers choose not to play games that put them under more pressure to compete."


SMI


SONY

Let's talk about PSX

Sony's PSX enables you to watch DVDs, record TV, rip your audio collection, store digital photos and play PS2 games online. Edge takes a closer look at the machine and the reasons behind its conception…

It's easy to be glibly dismissive of Sony's PSX. PS2 sales are in decline and, with PS3 still at least a year away from worldwide release, you might view PSX merely as interim hardware, a stopgap effort to inject life into a tired brand. We've seen it before in the Sega MegaCD, or the Nintendo 64DD, both of which are generally prefixed with the phrase 'ill-fated'.

This, however, is to miss the bigger picture. At the very least, PSX continues Sony's drive to capture the massmarket. To all intents and purposes, PSX is a DVD player that just happens to play games and record TV shows. The restrained design, the understated PlayStation2 logo, the placement of the controller ports, the overall size and shape… it's clearly targeted at families, or partnerships where the female dictates what enters the living room, and where gaming isn't a primary concern.

It's an overused phrase, but PSX is Sony's Trojan horse, an attempt at coaxing the massmarket into becoming videogame addicts by stealth. Sony hopes they'll come for movies and stay for games. It doesn't hurt that PSX owners will eventually link into Sony's gaming and music networks, paying for tracks and downloadable content.

PSX might also be a marker for the direction in which Sony wants to take its PlayStation brand. The original PS2 hinted at things to come by the inclusion of USB and i-Link (FireWire) ports. The ever-optimistic games press gleefully printed images of PS2 with a variety of Sony gadgets plugged into it – camcorders, digital cameras, MP3 players – yet nothing ever really came of this connectivity, mainly due to the lack of a hard drive.



In some respects it's odd that it has taken Sony this long to produce the PSX. There's nothing inherently hi-tech about what the system does. The constituent parts – recordable DVD drive, TV tuner, hard disk, broadband adaptor, PS2 hardware – have been available individually for some time, all Sony had to do was build a system to glue these disparate elements together. But, like Sony's robot dog Aibo, there has to be a first generation of any new product.



In operation, the PSX's frontend is simplistic – some might say dull, even

"The ultimate goal is essentially a computer system with vast storage capacity that sits somewhere in your house out of sight. It's plumbed directly into the broadband network"



Aibo was ridiculously expensive and not entirely overwhelming, but solid sales helped to maintain its development and now Sony is ahead of the loop in terms of AI, face recognition, voice recognition… not to mention other areas of robotics, such as the design of joints, servos, gyroscopics, power management and so on.

Likewise, developing the PSX is helping Sony work towards its goal of owning that space under your TV set. In fact, at the moment, it's everyone's goal: as the various areas of entertainment, communications and consumer electronics converge, there's a battle for control of your living room.

Converge and multiply

Where traditionally you might have owned a TV, video recorder, a hi-fi rack of separates (CD, tape deck, receiver), and perhaps a PC for surfing the web and managing your digital photos or camcorder footage, there's a new breed of machine that does it all. The market for such a device will be huge, and with the launch of PSX Sony has made its intentions clear. The term 'convergence' was popularised by communications scholar **Ithiel de Sola Pool**, in his 1983 book, 'The Technologies of Freedom'. He describes the 'convergence of modes' whereby various forms of communication – conversation, theatre, news and text – are homogenised by electronic delivery into "one grand system."

Consumer electronics companies have been dallying with the concept for two decades, putting radios and tape decks into hi-fi systems, and VCRs into portable TVs, but they've been continually hampered by the analogue format. Analogue signals are hard to store: you need huge amounts of memory (you can store nearly 10Gb of data on a C180 VHS tape) or arcane ways of reproducing them, such as with vinyl records. With the advent of processors able to compress and decompress data in realtime, almost every form of communication has entered the digital domain. With TV and radio finally available as bitstreams, the last bastions of analogue are film and the printed word. Even then, the rise of high-definition video and ebooks is beginning to make an impact.

To the computer, all this information is exactly the same: whether it's the first level of a videogame, a frame of movie footage, an audio track, an email… it's all 1s and 0s. You no longer need separate pieces of hardware to manage it all, and it can be delivered and stored in the same way: broadband, hard drives, removable media – and shared across wireless networks. The ultimate goal is essentially a computer system with vast storage capacity that sits somewhere in your house out of sight. It's plumbed directly into the broadband network, communicates with you wirelessly, and delivers interactive entertainment in high-definition and multichannel surround sound. Wireless technologies such as Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and even the impending 'wireless FireWire' (we assume a more suitable name is forthcoming) mean that cables can be removed from the equation: simply walk into the living room with your digital camera/camcorder/PDA – the system will recognise it and bring up the relevant options on your TV. There's also a chance it will operate your home security, turn the lights on and off and run you a bath when you phone from work.

Obviously everyone wants a piece of this action, and the big consumer electronics players are all keen to partner with companies that can offer technology, communications, broadband delivery and even content. But there's a major difference between a dumb terminal that plays a disc, and one that you use to search through photos, edit the names of MP3 tracks, or surf the web. You need a more adaptable operating system and a proper interface.

A new player in town

Having staked its claim in the PC market by creating the global standard in operating systems, web browsers and media players, Microsoft is constantly looking around for new areas to dominate. It's made serious inroads into the games market with Xbox, is currently working on Smartphone systems, and is looking at ways of getting into the car dashboard with automotive telematics.

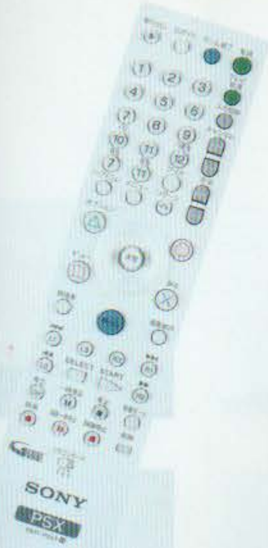
Most of all, Bill Gates wants that space under your TV. As broadband becomes broader, eventually there'll be one pipe that carries TV shows, news feeds, sports channels, pay-per-view films, pay-per-play games, pay-per-download music, websites and who knows what else. Whatever it is you do, he wants you to watch it, play it or listen to it using Microsoft software.

The company has already taken its first faltering steps with Windows XP Media



Removing a plastic flap eases access to th console's expected array of ports. You can forget about plugging in a multitap, though





The Japanese package does not include a joypad, but you can try gaming via the remote







Center Edition 2004. To be honest, it's all smoke and mirrors: Media Center PCs are just bog-standard computers in a pretty case, with a TV tuner, a remote control and a user-friendly interface. However, they do everything you'd want: they can access electronic programme guides, record TV and digital radio to the hard drive, show off your snaps, let you edit your home movies, burn CDs and DVDs, watch films, listen to music, play games... sound familiar?

All the major computer manufacturers are jumping on the Media Center bandwagon – including Sony – and it's put the fear of God into the consumer electronics manufacturers, who can see themselves relegated to mere licensees, all paying Microsoft just so that they can install the latest version of Windows Media Player.

There is a concerted effort by a group of companies – led by Sony and Matsushita – to create a digital consumer electronics OS based on Linux. Japanese consumer electronics manufacturers have long dreamed of a unified operating system of their own, in order to dominate the living room and dictate the development of next-generation hardware.

In the meantime, Sony has dipped its toe in the water with PSX. It probably amounts to little more than a trial run, a proof of concept, but Sony has a real head start over the other players, in that it has already earned its place in the living room, it has mind share with the PlayStation brand, it has the technology, and it also has access to a wide range of content.

As PSX makes use of convergent technologies, so it has also allowed Sony to leverage its separate divisions. A key part of this is the snappily titled 'EE+GS@90nm' chip, the central processor in PSX. This chip takes the core CPUs of the PlayStation2 – the Emotion Engine and Graphics Synthesizer – and fuses them onto a single unit, containing 53.5m transistors and 4Mb of embedded DRAM, using the latest 90-nanometre technology. This process is part of the plan to combine Sony's main semiconductor operation with that of Sony Computer Entertainment, taking technology developed by the latter and driving them into more general consumer electronics products – the first of which is PSX.

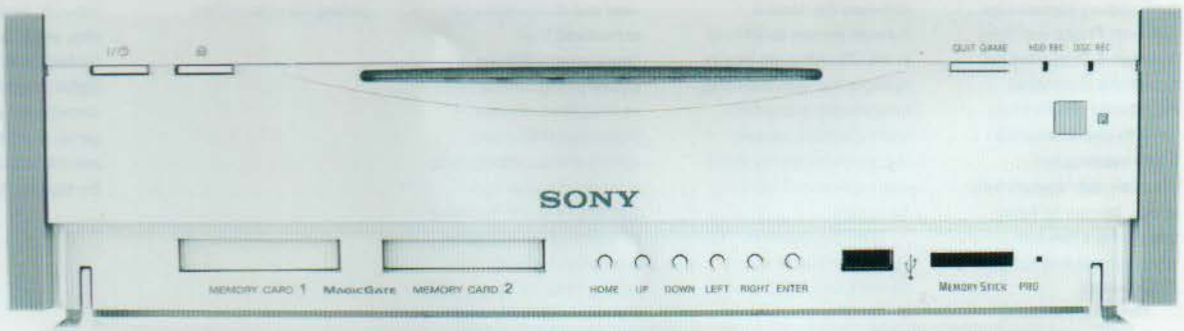


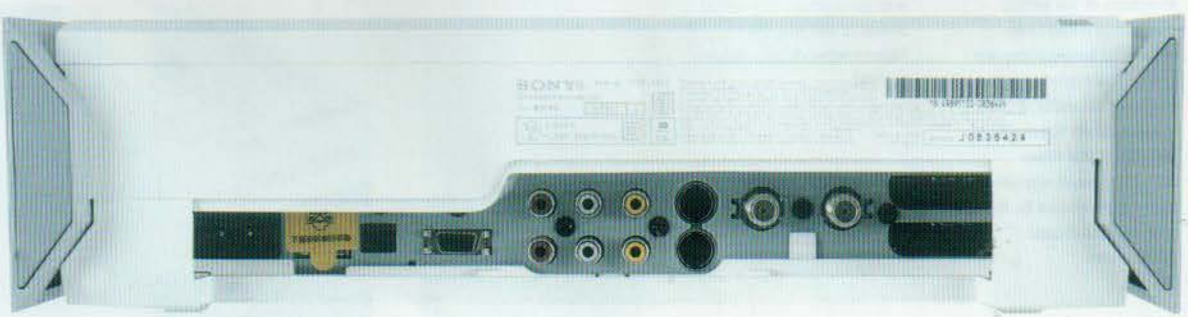


PS next?

Just how much bearing PSX has on PlayStation3 is difficult to say. Concrete information on Sony's third console is hard to come by, and so far speculation points towards a networked machine that may, by some reports, not even utilise an optical drive, accessing games and other content via broadband alone. It certainly doesn't make much sense for PS3 to be an expensive multifunction entertainment system, although exactly what form it will take is anyone's guess.

Ken Kutaragi has publicly stated, "The next-generation PlayStation will probably take the form of a game box, though it will not be a mere game machine." This was echoed by **Satoru Rick Oyama**, senior vice president of Lehmann Brothers, Japan: "I am very much interested in how Sony will promote PS3 as a new product for the home, because it will not be a simple





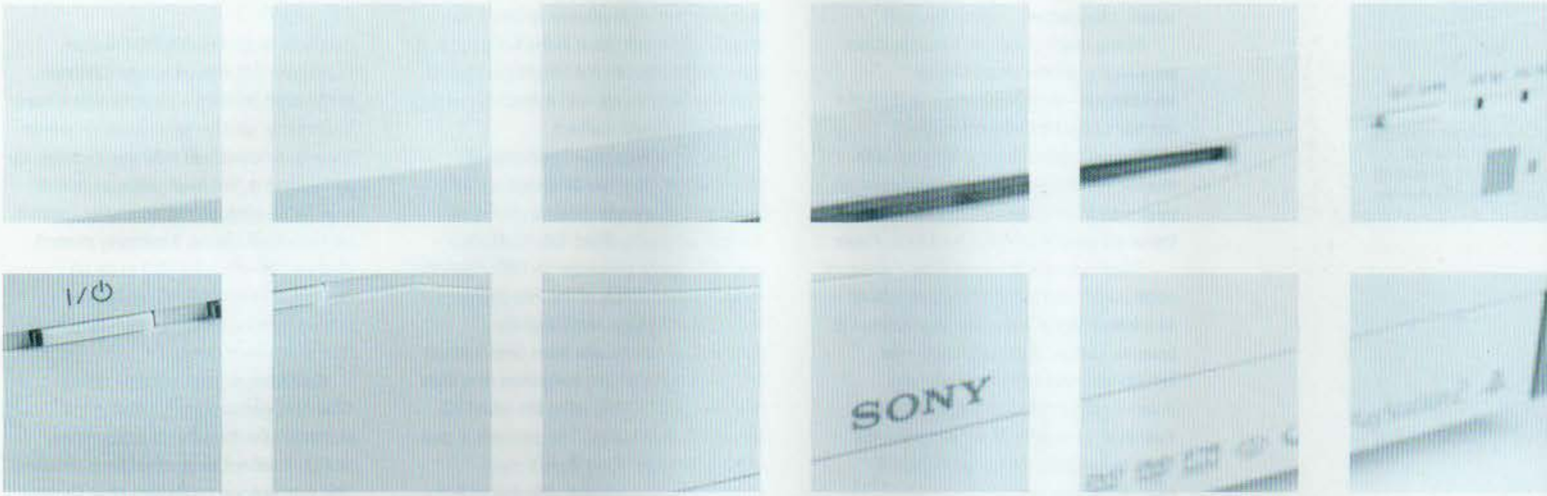
PSX priorities

The PSX unit is proud to offer two standard PlayStation memory cart slots on its front, but is slightly less forthcoming when it comes to inviting users to connect joypads, whose slots are situated at the rear. It's a telling clue as to how far down the ladder Sony is placing PSX's gaming functionality

Consoles and convergence

There have been several attempts at extending consoles beyond their basic gaming operation. The first real advances were made with the advent of CD-ROM storage. Not only did this offer CD-quality audio, but also improvements in compression techniques meant that video footage (of a sort) could also be included. On this spread **Edge** looks at the key developments.





1993
Both Sega and Nintendo aimed to add CD-ROM capability to their existing 16bit systems via add-on units. Famously, Nintendo's development partnerships with both Philips and Sony floundered. Sony went on to produce the original PlayStation, while Philips came to market with CD-i – a well-meaning but ultimately dull 'edutainment' centre, famous for being one of only a few non-Nintendo systems to host *Zelda* games.

However, the Dutch giant – along with other members of the MPEG committee – had been striving to squeeze movies onto a five-inch disc in the shape of VideoCD. A CD-i system, when fitted with its MPEG1 digital video cartridge, could reproduce Hollywood movies far better than its tape-based competitors.

1995
Two years later, Apple entered the fray with its 32bit Pippin multimedia system. Bandai picked up the technology and delivered the Atmark console (known as @World in the US). Although Pippin systems had web browsing, network play and MPEG video playback, games support was minimal and it was expensive. Oblivion beckoned.

Also this year, the XBand modem allowed Genesis and SNES gamers to play online, view score tables, receive newsletters and send email. Somewhat ahead of its time, the XBand network shut down in 1997.

1997
Rather than take an existing games machine and extend its remit, VM Labs attempted to do the opposite. This group of ex-Atari and 3DO employees announced their development of Nuon, a powerful chipset that could be integrated into any production DVD player, adding serious videogaming clout at little extra cost. Toshiba, RCA and Samsung all signed up for Nuon, but support and funding was lacking from the outset, and VM Labs eventually went into receivership in 2002.

1998
Sega launched Dreamcast, which offered networked play, email and web browsing. It turned out to be Sega's swansong in the gaming console market.

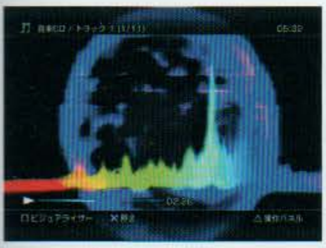
1999
The N64 (finally) gained a magnetic disc drive system called the 64DD. It also offered access to Nintendo's Randnet network, providing online play, email, downloadable content, web browsing, digital magazines and a stockmarket simulation game. Randnet lasted just one miserable year before the big N pulled the plug.

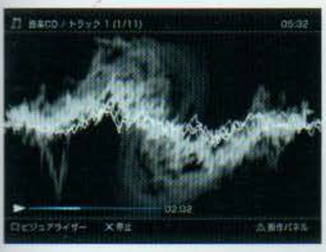
2000
Sony's PlayStation2 launched. The inclusion of DVD drive means that it was the first games machine to double up as a genuine, high-quality MPEG2 player. The additio of i-Link (FireWire) and USB ports offered a captivating glimpse of things to come.











The PSX's built-in music light machine is similar to those seen in most media units



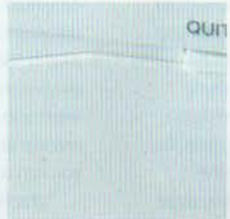
game machine." So where does this leave the competition? Well, Microsoft is coming at the market with a pincer movement: Windows Media Center on one side, Xbox on the other. Indeed, if convergence runs its true course, you can see where the two systems might merge to become an all-singin', all-dancin' home entertainment system – in which Microsoft supplies both the hardware and software. Again, until it's announced, we can only guess what tricks the Xbox2 might be capable of.

Where Nintendo fits into the equation is less clear. It's a very poor third in the race for any sort of network presence, and has failed to provide any other function in its hardware other than gaming. In fact, Nintendo has never made a system you can play audio CDs on, let alone rip MP3s or record TV. It has steadfastly stuck to its guns as a purveyor of finely crafted videogames, and while this is a pure and honourable objective, ultimately it could be something to rue. Adding DVD playback or CD burning or even email and web browsing does not compromise a system's capacity to play quality games. When you're trying to sell to the massmarket, these features become very strong reasons to purchase. There is already evidence of this with the launch of PS2 in Japan, where it was being bought as a cheap DVD player.

The videogame machine has arrived at a crossroads. Convergence is taking the medium of videogaming into new and uncharted territory, where ultimately it might become as ubiquitous as the television set (global count: just short of a billion) or the DVD player, which is on schedule to overtake VHS ownership by 2009.

We may well look back on PSX as a defining moment, the point when videogaming finally made its way into the living room – and stayed there.







The PSX hardware

The PSX system contains the guts of a PlayStation2, but adds a hard drive, broadband adaptor, analogue TV tuner and various ports and connections, so you can watch DVDs, rip and store audio CDs, record TV shows to the hard drive, maintain your digital photo collection and even burn discs. The Japanese version is available in two flavours, the DESR-5000 and DESR-7000. The former costs ¥99,800 (£514) and features a 250Gb hard drive, while the latter weighs in at ¥79,800 (£411) with a smaller, 160Gb HD. Externally, they're identical.

The PSX is a subtly handsome unit, with a glossy white polycarbonate case flanked by ridged grey panels. As with the PS2 it can be used flat, like a conventional hi-fi separate, or stood on end with the engraved PSX logo on display. If anything, it feels more appropriate lying prone, so you gain easy access to the slot-loading drive and removable storage on the front panel.

Clearly, the PSX has massmarket written all over it (despite the fact that, outside of Japan, the only people eager to get their hands on one are the most committed of committed). The design is miles away from the typical games console aesthetic; it's cool, angular and rather feminine, which is a marked change from the dramatic, macho lines of the PS2. (A smart move by Sony might be to make a matching AV amp, to make use of the digital audio outputs.)

Ports have been divided between a panel at the rear and one at the front that resides beneath a fold-down flap. All the serious connections are at the back, including twin controller ports; BS IF and VHF/UHF in; S-video, composite video, L/R stereo audio in and out; D1/D2 line out, optical digital out and an Ethernet port. These are recessed quite deeply, and access has been made easier by a removable plastic panel.

Up front, you get twin PS memory card slots; some tiny navigation buttons (standard fare on DVD players and AV amps); a USB port and a Memory Stick Pro slot. The Japanese import system is

2001

Microsoft's Xbox featured a built-in hard drive and broadband capability out-of-the-box. The hard drive enabled gamers to rip CDs and use their own audio tracks ingame.

Xbox Live launched in November 2002, providing network play and downloadable content.

2002

Panasonic enjoyed another brief dalliance with videogaming when it teams up with Nintendo to produce the Q, a GameCube and DVD player in one silvery stylish unit. Unsurprisingly, it never made it to Europe.

2003

Microsoft released Windows XP Media Center Edition 2004. A new breed of enhanced PC is developed which provides an all-in-one digital entertainment system, featuring TV recording, digital imaging, web browsing and, of course, videogaming.

With the release of the N-Gage, Nokia managed to squeeze mobile phone, web browsing, MP3 playback and even wireless multiplayer videogaming via Bluetooth, into a unit smaller than a GBA. Whether it will make a dent in Nintendo's hegemony remains to be seen; while Nokia claimed sales of 400,000 units for its first two weeks on sale, independent reports suggest the figures are somewhat lower.

2004

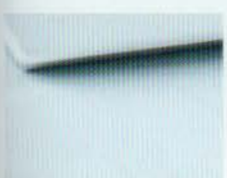
A PAL-compatible PSX arrives in Europe. Sony has suggested that all the missing features will be reinstated by this time.

Later in the year, Sony launches its portable games system, the PSP, which features ATRAC3/AAC/MP3 support, MPEG4 movie playback and wireless LAN for multiplayer gaming. Naturally, it employs a brand new proprietary media system, the 60mm-diameter Universal Media Disc (UMD), developed by Sony.











accompanied by a power lead, composite video/stereo audio cable (anyone with any sense will ditch this for S-video), a UHF extension lead and the remote control.

With such a small fascia, Sony really had little option but to situate the controller ports at the rear, leaving room for the removable media. However, not only does this make them difficult to get to, but because of the enclosure there's no room to plug in a Multitap, so while the PSX case is much larger than a standard PS2, you're still limited to twoplayer gaming.

However, on reflection, it's probably Sony's distinct intention to keep the gaming aspect low-key. After all, the unit doesn't even come with a joypad (matching PSX pads are available but you can use your old Dual Shocks without any problem). Presumably, it wants to sell PSX on the strength of its all-round functionality, not just on its gaming heritage.

Typically, storage is limited to Sony's proprietary systems. And while it's understandable Sony would want to support its own standards, in a world where Memory Stick only serves around 24 per cent of the market it's annoying that anyone with a camera that uses Secure Digital, CompactFlash or MultiMedia Cards can't use PSX to view their photos. The USB slot can be used to connect digital cameras, and although this currently only works with Sony cameras, the company has promised to provide drivers for other brands. Quite why Sony opted for USB1.1 instead of the faster USB2.0 is anyone's guess. It feels like penny-pinching. Having just a single port also precludes some peripherals.

Also, somewhere along the line, Sony forgot to include an i-Link (FireWire or IEEE1394) port, so you can't import DV footage from a camcorder for storing on the HD or burning to DVD. Presumably, this was due to the cost, not only of the port and circuitry, but also because it would necessitate more complex software. However, it does feel like a missed trick.

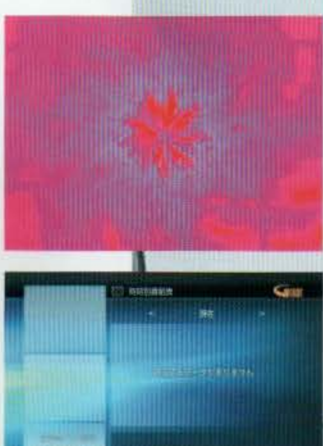
If you're thinking of buying a PSX on import, then a look at the remote should be a warning. Each button has a Japanese legend, and while most functions are fairly obvious, there are enough multifunction buttons to make it less than user-friendly.

Any serious thoughts of importing are banished when you connect the machine and boot up. For starters, the PSX is designed for continual connection to a UHF TV signal – a Japanese one, that is. Not only does the UK use different connectors, but we also operate on different frequencies and with PAL rather than NTSC. So for most of the time, all you get onscreen is white noise. Likewise, the electronic programme guide is useless outside Japan, so that's another feature you can write off.

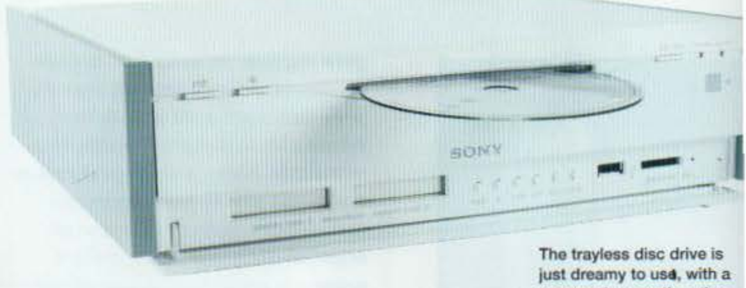
Like the remote, all of the menus are in Japanese and while the GUI is easily navigable, there are dozens of options that rely on a decent knowledge of kanji. This may explain why **Edge**'s testers couldn't get any DVD playback, even though we tried region 1, 2, 4 and 0 discs. During our exploration of the menus, either we turned off some vital component, or turned some other, equally unwanted, option on. Either way, we can't vouch for the playback quality, though we've no reason to doubt it.

Music CDs worked fine, however, enabling **Edge** to experience the built-in pattern generator, which displays colourful, waveform-based images in time to the music – a feature first seen in Atari's Jaguar and now de rigueur in multimedia devices. We ripped a CD to the hard drive, which took 50–70 seconds per track.

We also managed to use the photo system, which enables you to display your digital snapshots onscreen, flip them round, zoom and so on. Images are accessed via a Memory Stick, although you can plug Sony cameras into the USB port and transfer images that way. A brief glance at the networking options, where you can enter IP addresses and the like, was enough to convince us to leave well alone. Overall – and despite our problems with the lack of English menus – operating the PSX proved slightly frustrating. For starters, the machine should at least have the sense to autorun a disc. With both audio CDs and DVD, you need to access the menu, scroll down to the disc and click on the icon to start it playing (or not, as in our case).



Jeff Minter, eat your heart out (top). This (above) will become clear on PAL release



The trayless disc drive is just dreamy to use, with a supremely smooth action

"It comes back to the whole idea of convergence: you get one neat box to do it all for you. And that makes the PSX a very tempting offer"

Also, rather worryingly, there were times when the system froze for no obvious reason and the remote refused to work, even though we could operate the menu from the buttons on the front. Whether we had inadvertently clicked the 'Stop Working Properly' option, or the system just hung, it's hard to tell.

Frankly, you'd be silly to import a PSX now, if only because a PAL version is just around the corner. You lose so much functionality that it's little more than a completist collector's item. However, if the UK version comes in at a similar price level (roughly £410–£515), then it looks like a good deal. Existing PS2 owners might be better off getting a TiVo or Sky+, or maybe even just a DVD recorder, which you can now find for as little as £250. It comes back to the whole notion of convergence: you get one neat box to do it all for you. And that makes the PSX a very tempting offer. For a while, at least...



The PSX launch

Sony announced its plans to produce a PlayStation2-based multimedia system back in May of 2003, when it outlined the technical specs and Ken Kutaragi exuberantly explained that "the 'X' in PSX refers to the 'crossover' of games and electronics."

However, in the intervening months, Sony had to cut back on the level of specification in order to make it to market by Christmas. In truth, the reduction in functionality is marginal, and Sony has promised to restore much of the functionality in the next few months via downloadable firmware updates. But the backlash from Japanese analysts was vociferous.

Kazumasa Kubota of Okasan Securities wrote the PSX off as little more than a "publicity stunt" and suggested that sales would drop off after a month or two. **Kazuya Yamamoto** of UFJ Tsubasa, was similarly disparaging, claiming that "lowering the specifications of the PSX hurt Sony's image." He went on to say that the system had failed to deliver on Sony's promise, saying: "Did it turn out to be a superior machine as a DVD recorder? I certainly don't think so."

As ever, sales figures are hard to come by, and reports – presumably driven by Sony press releases – conflict with eyewitness testimony. Japanese newspaper 'Mainichi Shimbun' claimed that demand outstripped supply, and the first production run was almost depleted. While according to 'GameSpot', a week after launch, units were still readily available without pre-order, and one store had already relegated PSX from its prime store entrance position in favour of a broadband salesman. It has also been suggested that waning consumer interest is partly due to competition from Sony's other new products, a high-capacity Blu-ray DVD recorder, and its Sugo Roku personal DVD video recorder.

The missing specs

The biggest victim in Sony's cutbacks has been the lack of playback support for CD-R and DVD+RW discs. CD-Rs are by far the most popular format for backing up data and burning audio discs. However, the lack of DVD+RW is less problematic. Although it's a more technically advanced format than DVD-RW (Sony itself is a developer of the CD+RW format, which can be played back in most consumer DVD players and CD-ROM drives), DVD-RW media has the greater market share, by roughly 3:1.

In the course of downgrading the DVD drive, the dubbing speed has also dropped from 24x to 12x. This would still allow 60 minutes of TV to be backed up onto DVD in around five minutes.

Sony also chose to drop TIFF and GIF image file formats in favour of JPEG alone, but since almost every digital still camera in the world can save files as JPEGs, this is barely worth mentioning.

Of slightly more annoyance is the loss of the MP3 audio format in favour of Sony's own ATRAC3. This means that while you can rip audio tracks to the hard disk, you can't really do much else with them. You could burn them to a CD, but ATRAC3 isn't supported on anything except MiniDisc players and, you guessed it, Sony-branded equipment.

But the most curious omission is that of networking. The PSX does have an Ethernet socket, but there's a small warning label stuck over it to prevent its use. This means that PSX can't currently access the PlayStation broadband network or Sony's online music services.

Given that Sony states that features will be reinstated in the shape of downloadable firmware upgrades, it's unclear whether the broadband functionality is currently operational, or whether it perhaps requires a disc-based patch to activate it.


HIGH-CLASS
Tempest



Where next?

We're now well into a new year. And what do we find? Mics, arthouse games, a handheld battle and the 'death' of the platformer. Here, Edge looks at what will specifically define videogaming in 2004

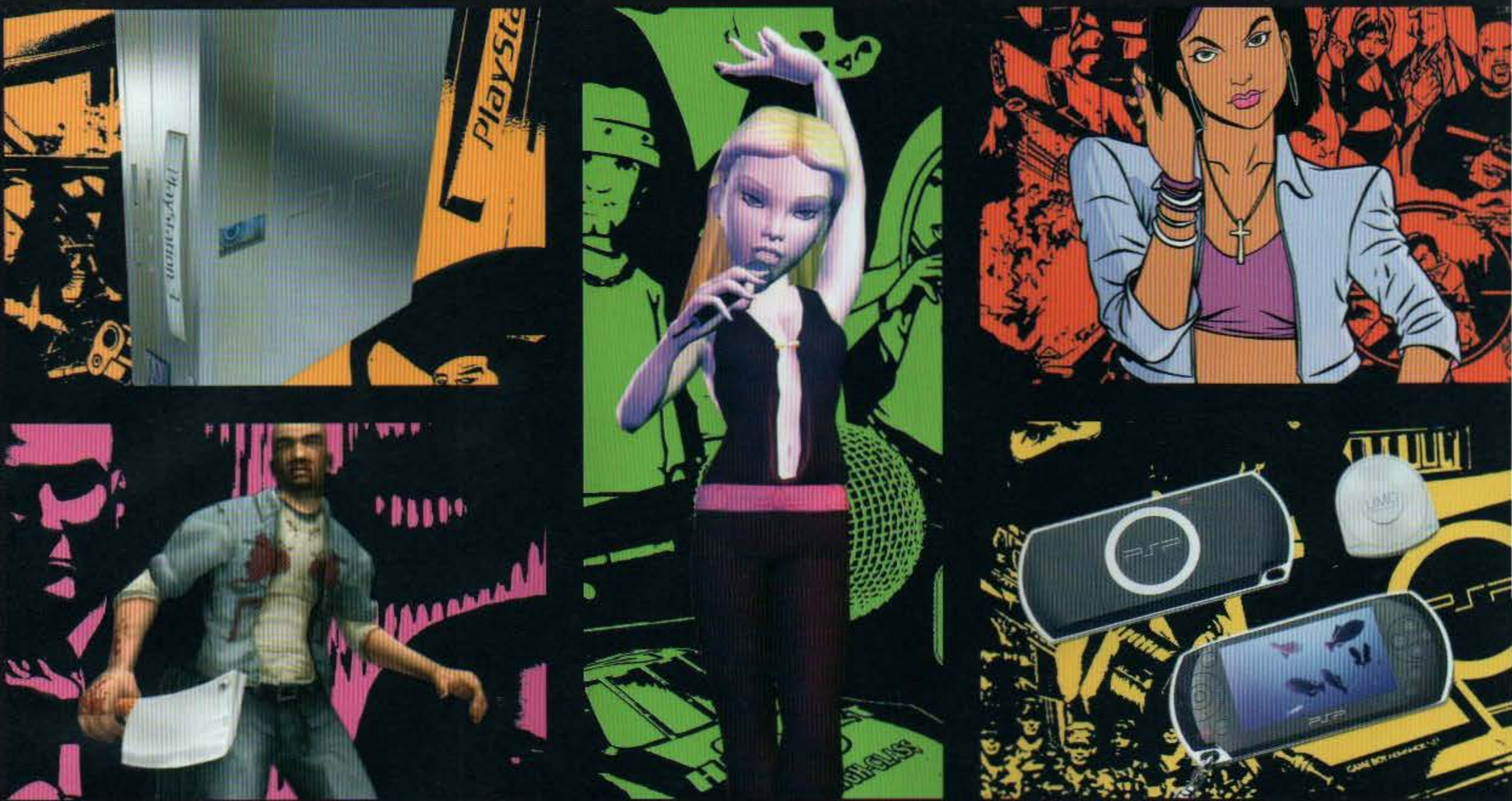
If you're wondering what happened to **Edge**'s review of 2003, it was cancelled. Having pondered Nintendo's slump, the N-Gage non-event, online console gaming's false start, *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* and EA's slick-but-soulless stranglehold on the chart, we decided to gloss right over the last 12 months and set sail for future lands. 2004 is already providing many more reasons to be cheerful.

There's the prospect of new hardware for a start, and nothing invigorates a scene like fresh technology. 2004's progeny is the PSP, scheduled for a Japanese launch in the winter, the first previews only weeks away. Mobile gaming has always been a disparate field, with nobody willing or able to join the dots in the public imagination between *Advance Wars 2* and *Snake*, but that's precisely what Sony is addressing with millions of dollars and many thousands of man hours.

Interest in the current console generation levelled out alarmingly during 2003, and when gamers lose their appetites, the only thing that usually tempts them back to the table is talk of the next generation. Microsoft aims to steal a march on its rivals by announcing Xbox2 in April. While we're aware that 'announcing' in this case will probably consist of a codename for the console and a list of numbers, that won't stem the tide of speculation. When will Sony respond with PS3? Nintendo is due to make a hardware announcement at E3 in May, yet claims this won't be a sequel to GameCube or Game Boy Advance. The company is instead promising something more innovative, changing the way we play. Expect 2004's trade shows, from Milia in March to the Tokyo Game Show in September, to be rife with rumour and gossip, if lacking in substance.

Despite the PC retreating further from the mainstream, with output increasingly consolidating around strategy titles and FPS mods, it will host the most anticipated games of the year in *Half-Life 2*, *Doom 3* and *Rome: Total War*. Elsewhere there's the return of *Grand Theft Auto*, a proper *Sims* sequel, *Killzone*, *Jade Empire*, *Halo 2*, *Nico*, *Fable* and much-anticipated new games from Criterion, Rare and Free Radical.

The massmarket may appear to be held to ransom by sequels and licences, but innovative technology such as the pitch-recognition karaoke games and EyeToy should also make an impact. Meanwhile, gaming continues to diversify at the margins, and a genuine two-tier system is starting to emerge with more esoteric, 'arthouse' or 'indie' games released for the delectation of the cognoscenti, unburdened by the expectation of huge sales. **Edge**'s resolution? To have even more fun. Over to the developers...



Big in 2004

Next-gen consoles

Microsoft is the only console manufacturer so far to commit to making an announcement about its next-generation machine (at the Game Developers Conference, March 22-26). Don't hope for interactive content or software line-ups: the physical reality is still many months off the radar.

Sony and Nintendo will follow suit with confirmation on their new consoles, ensuring that 2004 will become a willy-waving war over who's got the fastest processor and the most provocatively named graphics processor. So long as you don't look too deeply into the hype, this kind of pre-product posturing is always fascinating, with each company vying for a subliminal advantage and establishing the ground on which the *real* hardware battle will be fought next year.

Gaming gets gritty

Traditional fantasy games have been becoming more unfashionable for years, but it finally seems that the popularity of contemporary crime- or war-based adventures are pushing them into the most distant corners of the public consciousness. The ubiquity of the *Grand Theft Auto*, *True Crime*, *Max Payne*, *Splinter Cell* and *Medal Of Honor* franchises in 2003 contrasted with difficult times for *Prince Of Persia*, *Primal* and anything that featured swords instead of guns, with the *The Lord Of The Rings* games as isolated anomalies. Meanwhile, child-friendly character action games (known more simply as platformers back in less market-driven eras) such as *Haven*, *Jak II* and even *Mario Sunshine* failed to make much impact as kids demanded more violence and gore.

Expect more crime, brutality, urban dysfunction and 'keeping it real' this year.

If *GTA4* included network play, the problems with slow take-up of online console gaming could be solved in a flash… *GTA4* will undoubtedly pioneer all kinds of smaller innovations

Singing and dancing

As predicted in last issue's cover feature, 2004 will be the year of the karaoke game. As *Dancing Stage* and EyeToy have proved, the mainstream is more easily seduced by games with simple rules and simple interfaces. Everyone already knows how to 'play' karaoke, but everyone wants to know exactly how good they are in relation to their friends, so it's difficult to see how *Singstar* and *Karaoke Stage* can possibly fail. **Edge** staffers can already hit the top notes on 'Heart Of Glass'. Can you?

GTA leads the way

Cards on the table: the biggest-selling game of 2004 will be the next *Grand Theft Auto*. Probably not much of a risk bet given that *GTAIII* and *Vice City* both outsold the second bestselling games of their respective release years by almost 2:1. *GTA* is simply the most important franchise in gaming, and whatever Rockstar does with it next will set the agenda for everyone else. If *GTA4* included network play, the problems with slow take-up of online console gaming could be solved in a flash. That's unlikely to happen yet, but *GTA4* will undoubtedly pioneer all kinds of smaller innovations, both technical and cultural. Rumours continue to sugges that it'll be set in a fictionalised version of either San Francisco or LA but, as per tradition, real informatio will remain classified until later in the year.

We intend to bring you the scoop.

PSP

Nintendo has owned the back pockets of the world's gamers for so long that it's easy to forget that the first company to own anyone's pockets was Sony. Can the PSP hope to replicate the mobil revolution of the Walkman? And, if it does, will it be due to the media-on-the-move temptations that have fuelled the iPod phenomenon? Or will Sony suddenly suffer from the kind of copyright protectio jitters that lead it to remove MP3 compatibility from the PSX? Either way, it's hoped the PSP succeeds on the strength of its games. Yes, we can expect a flood of unsuitable PS2 ports and clones, but PSP's nature makes distinct innovation a possibility. Sony is in a position to marry Nintendo's instinct for gameplay with Nokia's reliance on big brands – imagine *MGS: VR Training*, *Final Fantasy Monsters*, *Dark Cloud: Spheda Dungeons*, *Zone Of The Enders Tactics*, perhaps. Expect specialist PSP development teams to start emerging everywhere, following EA Canada's lead.

Thor Frolich
Designer, Io Interactive



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
I think the sales figures of the *GTA* series have shown publishers that mature content doesn't mean lower sales if the gameplay is good. I hope this will enable publishers to allow for more mature themes in games.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
Half-Life 2. I really liked the first one and it seems as if the nice tech is actually being used for gameplay benefits. Also, I'm looking forward to seeing what the mod community will come up with.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I think we'll see console developers finally wanting something a lot of PC developers have got – online multiplayer expertise. Granted, online gaming via consoles isn't that widespread yet, but it'll get there. I think we'll see some cool console titles doing multiplayer stuff normally reserved for the PC. Also I think there will be a tendency for projects to grow much larger than we've seen before. This will most likely result in fewer productions but with bigger budgets. Size will matter.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
To sell enough copies to allow us to continue making the games we like and to improve our skill every time we do so. It sounds very banal, but there it is.

Ted Price
President, Insomniac



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
I think it was the end of the worldwide recession. Economies throughout the world are beginning to rebound from a pretty awful 2002 and people have more money to spend on games now! The numbers this holiday have already been very positive for consoles and console games.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
Everquest 2. I was an *Everquest* junkie when it was first released and the features that apparently exist in *Everquest 2* look very, very cool.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I think that because of the PSP's coming launch a lot of companies who ignored handheld development in the past are considering it now. Therefore I think you'll see a lot of new entries in that arena by companies who haven't done handheld development before. As a result of the new hardware and new development approaches, handheld gaming should be very different than what we've seen for the past several years on GBC and GBA. As far as who will be making waves goes… Rockstar never fails to surprise people. Sony firstparty, as well – though we at Insomniac are biased!

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
Make 'em bigger, better, faster, stronger! As always…

Yoshinori Kitase
Producer, *Final Fantasy X-2*, Square Enix



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
The merger of Square and Enix. It all happened so suddenly, it was quite a shock, especially for it to happen to the company you work for.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
Half-Life 2.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
Recently I have become interested in gaming genres which I haven't really tried my hand at before. If possible, I think I would like for us to be the company which makes the trend-setting games of 2004.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
When new hardware becomes available, there is a tendency to concentrate only on getting the most out of it, and making something revolutionary with that hardware. However, now that we are at a stage where the PS2 has been around for a while, I think we've entered a phase where it's possible to enjoy concentrating on the software itself. For this reason, I would like to make games which make the most of this more software-oriented phase in the life of the console.

Martin Kenwright
Managing director, Evolution Studios



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
I think this was definitely the year that broadband gaming took off. Sega should receive a lot of respect for the early work it did making it acceptable for the massmarket, but I have to take my hat off to Sony, and to Microsoft, for making a success of what is still a relatively niche market. Hopefully this has served to whet the appetites of the consumers, and we can expect more exciting things from this area in the coming year.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
There's so much on the horizon it's difficult to pick one game. I guess the one game that shook everybody up at E3 was *Half-Life 2*. It's nice to see a company that didn't get bloated by its previous success, and instead pumped their profits back into development. Providing they get the pacing right, that could be a contender for game of the year already. Other than that, *The Movies* and *Evil Genius* really intrigue me for what they plan to add to the life-sim market – *The Sims* is a good game, no doubt, but there's a distinct lack of purpose there which these two games may be able to capitalise on. Lastly, I'll have to say *GT4*, purely because I'm interested in what else they're going to do with it. There's only so much longevity in *Pokémon*-with-cars, but the sheer level of polish they can afford should make it a special title in its own right.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I think the watchword is likely to be "connectivity", whether through existing online services or through mobile gaming. What's been seen so far is only the tip of the iceberg for this sector; with wireless networking now an affordable reality, you're finding this kind of technology in everything from the iPod to the N-Gage. Connectivity is big business.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
As our model is to provide a licensed, yearly-iterating product, certain sectors of the market don't seem to be taking us seriously. Believe me, we are deadly serious. We are extremely passionate about not just our technology, but also our focus on great gameplay. All I can say is that we will continue to plough our own furrow.

Jason Kingsley
CEO, Rebellion



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
TIGA's continued growth and the maturing of the games development industry along with its recognition at the highest level in government. And some great parties, too.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
I prefer to find games that come with less hype than the 'next big thing' that's had too much marketing money thrown at it, so I'll browse the shelves of my local store and see what takes my fancy, and hopefully be surprised rather than disappointed.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I think there will be more development companies going bust, but an awareness at senior level within international publishers that a healthy independent community is important for their future too. I think we'll also see more sophisticated financial deals allowing developers to fund games outside the standard 'advance from a publisher' model.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
Another chart hit would be great. As would achieving both a critical and commercial success at the same time, which seems to be getting increasingly rare these days. There have been some shockingly bad titles released that have sold well and some stunningly good titles that have just not appeared in the sales charts.

Ray Muzyka
Joint CEO, BioWare



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
Lots of great games came out this year – I've got a huge stack of them for Xbox, PS2, GameCube, GBA and PC which I haven't even played yet! And to promote one of our own games which we're very proud of, at BioWare we released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* this year for both PC and Xbox (with LucasArts as publisher); *Knights* had a lot of really unique features which hopefully will help influence RPG development in the future, with ideas like being able to roleplay as either a good or evil character and have the storyline change to match the choices you make.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
I'm looking forward to pretty much all of the RPGs (my favourite genre) that are due to come out next year. Also *Half-Life 2* and *Halo 2*, since I'm a big FPS fan!

What will big the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
2004 is a pretty exciting year for consoles, since it falls in the 'peak' year for both PS2 and Xbox in terms of maximum numbers of both systems available on the market. As well, developers will have had lots of time to fine tune their processes and most games coming out during that year will be second- or third-generation games on their respective systems – so quality on the consoles should be very high in 2004. Hopefully it will be a good time for gamers!

What do you hope to achieve for your games/company in 2004?
At BioWare we're currently working on three new intellectual properties, all games set in brand-new BioWare-created worlds. We're really excited about all of them – they're all quite distinct from one another in terms of setting – and there are both PC and console games in the pipe at BioWare. The only one we've announced any details on thus far is *Jade Empire*, to be published for Xbox by Microsoft in Q4 2004. In *Jade Empire* you get to roleplay as a martial arts master in the world of mystical/mythical China. So we're hoping to build something that fans really enjoy with *Jade Empire*, and we're looking forward to revealing more details on the other two worlds!

Jamie MacDonald
Development director, SCE Studio London



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
I think EyeToy and the increasing success of social gaming in general is fantastic for gamers. There have been a few false dawns, but with EyeToy and network gaming on console I think it's finally happening for real.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
Sports games going online and offering me the chance to buy and sell top footballers against real players around the world is something I am very much looking forward to. Also I think you will see a lot of developers making great EyeToy games.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
Social gaming around the family TV or across a network will continue to be more and more important. The best developers will realise that people want to play games together and deliver multiplayer fun. That may mean using dance mats, EyeToy or network technology but the real question will be how do we get people having fun together in a game that all groups enjoy. Expect to see good things from Polyphony, Electronic Arts, Creative Assembly and Io Interactive among others.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
At London Studio we will continue to push boundaries and explore new genres. Innovative products like EyeToy and *Singstar* will continue to take the PS2 into the mass market, the next *This Is Football* title will redefine online gaming on the PS2, while *The Getaway 2* will just shock and amaze! London Studio will be at the forefront of delivering cool experiences for gamers new and old.

J Allard
Corporate vice president, Xbox, Microsoft



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
This past year was filled with historical advancements for the videogame industry and Microsoft in particular, so it is hard to limit this answer to one specific quality. However, the biggest leap has been expanding the social arena in the gaming community. This includes broadening the audience demographics with entertainment opportunities beyond games. Microsoft is creating a digital entertainment lifestyle with the Xbox where constant entertainment connections are being made through games, music, photos, and online interaction.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
I am a big fan of the sports titles, so I am eagerly anticipating *NFL Street*. It is fun to play and has great features like different pro football stars on different field surfaces. *NFL Street* is a clear indication that there are many exciting things happening in the sports line-up currently and many more to come. There are also many exciting developments within the action and adventure genre including the games *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* and *Ninja Gaiden*. The multiplayer factors and the online capabilities in both of these games will undoubtedly add a more realistic dimension to the action.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
Online has proven to be a factor and will continue to grow in 2004. Developers like UbiSoft and others see the value of online and the increased demand and value that it brings to the consumer.

What do you hope to achieve for your games/company in 2004?
Microsoft believes that the future of videogame consoles lies in the ability of the software and the capability to expand the entertainment community. Microsoft has always been a leader in innovation and we will continue to redefine the videogame experience. Microsoft believes that the future of gaming is in the online community and intends to add new features to enable better social interaction.



N-Gage's not dead

It's a good thing the N-Gage isn't a game console. Consumers still have healthy expectations for the lifespan of a gaming machine, as evidenced by the outcry when Nintendo 'rushed' out the GBA SP a scant 23 months after the original's launch. Happily, the mobile phone market is used to a more highly accelerated cycle of hardware improvement, and there's no reason for Nokia not to press ahead in 2004 with a new N-Gage model to make better use of its enormous investment. It will need to be genuinely pocket-sized to see off the PSP threat, with slot-loading game cards, real network play, a physical volume control, a SIM-free game mode and better battery life. And since everyone agrees the one thing Nintendo got entirely wrong with the GBA was its game pricing, we need to see N-Gage titles at the £19.99 mark, but Nokia isn't surrendering on that just yet.

Squadplay

2004, just like 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000 and all those 1990s before it, is supposed to be the year online gaming *really* takes off. It won't, of course, due to the twin factors of a complex and expensive infrastructure and a market that isn't nearly as universally drawn to the idea as speculative analysts like to think. The crucial aspect for attracting new players will be co-operation – the ability to join forces in infantry squads, sports teams and adventurers' guilds helps ease in nervous newbies, while the camaraderie they provide tempts veterans back again and again. *Pandora Tomorrow*'s combo stealth and *Full Spectrum Warrior*'s co-ordinated strategy both look particularly appealing. Indeed, the thirst for online co-operation is leading gamers to invent team modes for strictly competitive games. **Edge** recommends *PGR2* cat-and-mouse. Two teams of two, each with a Mini and an Enzo. The Enzo provides the pushing power, and the first Mini across the line wins. Irresistible.

Half-Life is back

Half-Life 2. Much more than a sequel. Predictions? Thousands, perhaps millions, of gamers will overhaul their PCs for this game alone; it will provoke developers into reassessing their own titles, the focus turning to the emergent possibilities inspired by a comprehensive physics system; the mod community will spend the next five years adapting levels from the game, replacing the troops with characters from 'Fraggle Rock'; and Shigeru Miyamoto will declare: "I love the giant three-legged crabs, but I had to stop playing because it made me feel dizzy." *Battlefield: Vietnam*, *Doom 3*, *Far Cry*, *Rome: Total War* and *Star Wars Battlefield* also star in a monumental year for the PC faithful.

Retro to the future

Retro gaming is not a new phenomenon, of course, but like the 'I Love...' TV series that spawned the nostalgia craze, the videogame industry is likely to be catching its own tail before long. Sega has already exhausted its best Mega Drive franchises in the form of retropacks, so the rich seam of Saturn titles will inevitably be on the hit list in 2004. But where next? It may be an easy revenue stream for cynical publishers, but the prospect of a *Shenmue*, *Ferrari F355 Challenge*, *Chu Chu Rocket* and *Soul Calibur* smash pack on Xbox is a delectable one.

Arthouse gaming

Ico, *Broken Sword 3*, *Manhunt*, *Gregory Horror Show*, *Skies Of Arcadia*, *O.TO.GI*... all were acclaimed as great games in these pages, and all failed to trouble the chart compilers. Publishers are beginning to digest the fact that if one of their games doesn't sell millions, it might not always be because it's crap – it's possible to be valid without being popular. No one believes the most exciting and original music can be found within the Top 40, so why should it be any different for games? The market for 'arthouse' games is limited, but growing all the time as people discover the delights of dabbling outside the mainstream. Publishers need to create sales models that allow for esoteric games to be released unburdened by expectations of sales. Then maybe the likes of *Animal Crossing* and *Disgaea* will get proper UK releases.

> The mod community will spend the next five years replacing the troops with characters from 'Fraggle Rock,' and Shigeru Miyamoto will declare: "I love the giant three-legged crabs"

Continued

Alex Ward
Creative manager, Criterion Games



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
EyeToy. It brought a lot of new people into gaming by removing a barrier – the controller. It quickly became *the* PlayStation accessory for the summer. Everyone was just loving it. I know it was only for a few weekends, but the first day was just so much fun. Personally speaking, it was playing *OutRun 2* at the coin-op preview show. I'd waited a long time for it to arrive and it didn't let me down. Best drift ever.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
It might sound like a cliché but I have to say *Gran Turismo 4* – although I'm still under the influence of receiving *Prologue* just yesterday. And this is from someone who just could not play the first two games. *GT3 A-Spec* turned me into a motoring geek – I even chose a car based on how much I enjoyed it in the game. *Prologue* has relit the fire. Nobody, just nobody, does real driving like Polyphony. I'm sure it will be a stunning achievement.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I expect the common answer will be online play, but I have a feeling that portable gaming is going to make a big splash when the PSP hits the shelves. A 'Walkman for the 21st century' – you'd better believe it. I expect Sony to stay on top, Microsoft to get it right a bit more, EA to forge even further ahead of everyone else, and videogaming to get bigger and better than ever. I just don't subscribe to the 'it's all rubbish' mentality – the scene could not be any healthier.

What do you hope to achieve for your games/company in 2004?
I hope that we continue to deliver great software that a lot of people enjoy playing. Simple, really.

Warren Spector
Studio director, Ion Storm



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
From a purely personal standpoint, Ion Storm shipping *Deus Ex: Invisible War* was clearly the high point of the year! On a slightly less personal note, I was pleased to see some terrific games appearing on the Xbox – the Christmas slate in the US was chock full of gaming goodness and, honestly, I didn't feel that way in years past. More specifically, I was really happy to see that a more player-centric, freeform approach to gameplay was moving into the mainstream of design thinking – sandbox gameplay isn't just *GTAIII*, *Deus Ex*, *Thief* and *The Sims* any more. Lots of folks are jumping on the bandwagon and I think gamers are the big winners when that happens. Oh, and *Warioware* ruled!

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
Half-Life 2. End of story. OK, *Gran Turismo 4*. Don't make me pick. I want both of 'em!

What will big the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I don't know if I'm the best prognosticator around but I certainly see the appearance of some amazing high-end rendering techniques making their way into games. Ion's trying some stuff out and, of course *Doom 3* and *Halo 2* promise to take things to a whole new level. The hardware's there to make it possible and I suspect it won't be long before gamers come to expect even higher levels of graphical quality than they do now. Let's just hope developers don't lose sight of gameplay quality as they scramble to push all those pixels around! Maybe even more important is the stuff Valve is doing on the virtual actor front. Game characters are going to be stunning in a couple of years and Valve's clearly at the forefront of that effort. We're just seeing the tip of the iceberg now. I doubt any of us really understand the profound effect better actors will have on gaming.

What do you hope to achieve for your games/company in 2004?
I want to see Ion ship a great, great *Thief* game and then see us focus a bit more on development process issues so we can deliver great games in a more timely, cost-effective manner. Tall order, but I think we're up to the task. We'll see!

Gavin Raeburn
Studio head, Codemasters



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
EyeToy, as it makes gaming appeal to a more mainstream audience, which in turn helps change many people's perception of gaming.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
I'm looking forward to *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence* because of its long history of in-depth gameplay. I'm also looking forward to *Syphon Filter*, because I enjoyed the tension, stealth and sniping action of the original version.

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I think online use will continue to grow, slowly but steadily. Developer-wise, UbiSoft took a big risk at Christmas in releasing so many new and original games, so I hope that pays off for them. It will encourage other publishers to be more innovative and creative with the games they release.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
Critical and commercial success, and some happy punters.

Seth Luisi
Senior producer, SCE America



What was the best thing that happened to gaming in 2003?
The announcement of the PSP. I can't wait to start developing and playing real 3D games on a handheld device. I've become so accustomed to 3D games and the added depth that they offer. Only a couple of GBA games in the last two years have caught my interest. The PSP will finally bring the 3D revolution to the portable gaming market. The UMD will also allow for high-quality streaming music, movies and VO in portable games. Not to mention the potential of embedded WiFi support. To me as a gamer, it's about time that portable games caught up with the living room consoles after all these years.

Which game are you most looking forward to playing?
Half-Life 2. I'm hoping it will live up to the hype, but only time will tell...

What will be the big gaming trend of 2004, and which developers/companies will be making waves?
I do not think that there will be a lot of innovation or new trends over the next year, only a lot of sequels. Online console gaming will become even more important and more games will support online game modes but the true innovation will come when the PSP and next generation consoles are launched. Don't get me wrong, I think that there will be a lot of really good games next year, but 200 will be epic.

What do you hope to achieve with your games in 2004?
This year I plan on doing some contemplation to prepare for the next wave. To me, it is very important at this time to think about what's next and how we can create new experiences on PlayStation2, PSP and beyond.









Star power

Killzone? crapzone more like. hahahahahahahaaaaa!!!!!!!!!
killzone is stupid! it could never beat halo!!!!!!
Why do people trust Amazon customer reviews so much?

It's insights like that, delivered with a level of certainty matched only by the reviewer's total lack of hands-on experience, that drag *Killzone*'s Amazon average down to three-and-a-half stars. *Halo 2* is faring better, garnering four stars overall, and it's really no wonder, since it appears: "this game is worth buying even if you just look at the box all day long".

It's easy to be dismissive of the inarticulate fanboy rants which can clog the system, but it's clear from the effort Amazon invests in them that the customer reviews are one of the biggest things to draw people to the site. Why place such faith in these amateur efforts? Precisely because they are amateur. It's a word that tells you nothing about the quality of the review, only that it was written for love not money. And from the mish-mash of sober and hysterical, informed and speculative, articulate and illiterate opinions that settle at the bottom of every page, it's possible to sieve out some very useful nuggets.

It's a very different world from the magazine review, which is presented as being balanced, considered and definitive, and where readers are more and more aware that – whether or not it's staunchly resisted – advertisers are doing all they can to maximise their leverage.

Amazon isn't designed for gamers. It's designed for shoppers who want to buy games. Nor does it think games require any specialist presentation, absorbing them into its commercial democracy on the same footing as poetry and blenders. It means that, while it isn't designed to cater for the hobbyists, Amazon's recommendation system does a fine job of encouraging hesitant gamers away from the beaten path. In a perfect example of six degrees of separation, a customer who comes to search for as conservative a bet as the new 'Lord of the Rings' game can, with just those six mouse clicks, take a whirlwind journey through *Rogue Squadron III*, *Mario Kart Double Dash!!*, *Soul Calibur II* and *Ikaruga*, before landing up in the delightfully unexpected territory of *Gitaroo Man*. At every stage there's the reassuringly partisan voice of one of your peers, letting you peep through their gaming window and see what you might be in for.



Amazon is coy, refusing to reveal any sales or visitor figures, however there's no doubt that its market share is growing. The plain-speaking reason behind its success should give every sector of the specialist games industry – PR, retailers and magazines – some chewy food for thought.

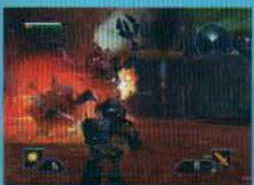
Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Metal Arms

It's the game that keeps on giving. The line-dancing exam and the fake Warthog race against time make up for the disappointment of the last irksome boss.



(PS2, Xbox) Vivendi

Manhunt

We love the way the game shifts paradigms constantly before its bizarre conclusion. It's a bit like 'Fight Club' but with added snuff.



(PS2) Rockstar Games

Project Gotham Racing 2

The sleeper hit amongst brandy butter-sodden relatives this Christmas. Just don't bother trying to explain to them how reversing works.



(Xbox) Microsoft

Beyond Good & Evil

Criminally overlooked in the Christmas game glut. Ubisoft's thirdperson adventure is a cracker. And you can't argue with Jade's brave choice of green lipstick.



(Various) UbiSoft

testscreen

The world's most respected videogame reviews

Ambitious minds

It's a great idea *in theory*

Ambition. Rarely is this perceived as a negative quality. If you're ambitious then you're keen, you're hungry, you're the man with the plan, the host with the most, the handsome young go-getter, the dreamer, the schemer, the one who wants it most, and if you're driving the bus then everyone else had better hang on for the ride because you're going straight to the top and ain't nothing gonna stand in your way. It's a long way before ambition eventually transforms itself into arrogance and hubris.

Edge regularly suggests there isn't enough ambition on display on the shelves of videogame stores. Most publishers are content to play safe with sequels, licences and games that fall within traditional stylistic conventions. Any developer declaring an ambition to produce games that aim for something above and beyond the status quo should be applauded. In fact, that accounts for virtually all developers who talk to **Edge**. So why don't most games out there reflect this? Much of it is down to publisher influence and unwillingness to take risks, but there's also the fact that some developers can't and don't deliver on their ambition. It's when this ambition overtakes the impetus to make a brilliant game that we have problems.

Deus Ex: Invisible War (below) is a great game, but it genuinely suffers from overstretched ambitions. Ion Storm's desire to provide a grand conspiracy storyline appears to have distracted it from little inconsistencies that can really frustrate when all you want to do is get to the end. And if you promise real-world interactivity, you can't start reinventing physics. If 'indestructible' glass exists in your game world, why aren't the superweapons of the Mako Ballistics Laboratory protected by it?

As covered in Prescreen, *Resident Evil Outbreak*'s AI is initially very impressive. It seems exactly how human players would react – so why is it programmed to constantly repeat the same few robot-like phrases, thoroughly shattering the illusion of artificial intelligence?

Sure, there are far worse game development crimes than over-ambition. Great games are all about stretching technology to its limits while maintaining utter consistency within the world you create. It's no use drawing up ever more ambitious and lifelike rules when the technology is not yet ready to sustain them.









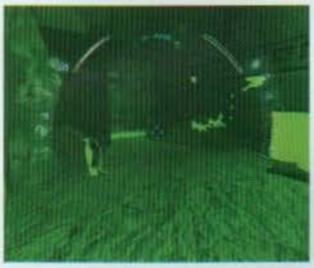




Deus Ex: Invisible War

Format: **Xbox (version tested), PC** Publisher: **Eidos** Developer: **Ion Storm** Price: **$50 (£29)** Release: **Out now (US) March (UK)**







Pub doormen eye you up from behind indestructible glass. Why *Deus Ex*'s secret bases don't invest in the same protection is something of a mystery

Deus Ex teaches you some hard lessons. As Denton moves through the first game, and Alex embarks on her (or his) subsequent adventure, every twist of the story tells you to trust no one, that every apparently free choice is mired in manipulation by unseen forces. Why would any veteran of the series believe Ion Storm's designers when they promise you can wage war as you choose?

Set 20-odd years after the Collapse initiated by JC Denton's actions, *Invisible War*'s story, although elaborate, is badly told. NPCs spout gouts of exposition in patchily voiced cut-scenes. 'You'll already have guessed, Alex…' they begin, before unloading the next conspiratorial trump when you haven't been given enough raw information to have honed your suspicions.

By contrast, every major player in the game seems to be able to tap into your neural lace at will and eavesdrop on you, as well as queuing up to chip in with their own variants of 'Don't trust them, trust me!' at the end of every chapter. Not that your choices matter a great deal. Each wing of the conspiracy will forgive you almost any infraction, and right up until the end it's possible to switch allegiances on a whim. It undermines any sense of commitment or risk as you move through the story.

As does Alex's blabbery mouth. Again and again, just as the conspiracy is starting to get its hooks into you, Alex suffers a fit of compulsive honesty. Bumping into someone

"Will you take the time to scour complexes for air vents, or go on a multi-tool spending spree and unlock every door you find?"



The arctic levels have a survival-horror feel. The lizardy Greasels' all-or-nothing attacks make the human AI seem weak

she barely knows and certainly shouldn't trust, she'll share every last secret. Choose a smart-arse answer from a dialogue tree and you'll trigger a cut-scene where she spontaneously agrees to pledge her allegiance to someone you were previously planning to shoot in the head.

It happens because there simply isn't anything like the amount of freedom in the game the premise promises. Even once you have a jet at your personal disposal it won't take you anywhere until the story clears you for take-off. No matter how much you want to return to lower Seattle to tidy up a little sub-mission you now have the tools for, you simply can't. And when you do choose, the







Visually, the game strives for moody but ends up hitting gloomy. There's very little memorable here, although later levels are grander inventions

game isn't smart enough to handle the fallout. Shoot a fellow Tarsus agent in the face with a tranq dart because she's getting in your way and neither the game nor the lady herself will remember it the next time you meet. When you find the secret lair of the evil headmaster, you can storm out of its hidden exit into his very public office, do a dance and throw at his head the measly flag that was disguising the door and he still won't register that the jig is up.

On a smaller scale, however, the flexibility works well. Will you take the time to scour complexes for air vents, or go on a multi-tool spending spree and unlock every door you find? Simply tiptoe past the titanic Templar



elites, or spear them on the end of an ammo guzzling, sky-searing mag-rail blast?

The universal ammo system has prompted more controversy than such an exemplarily sensible system seems to deserve. It's the core of what freedom there is, since ammunition limitation is one of the most overused tools in governing your path through a game. How many FPSs can you think of which bestow upon you a juicy snip rifle or rocket launcher only to drip-feed you microscopic doses of their ammunition, ensuring you remain tied to your standard pea-shooter? In *Invisible War* you can abandon everything but the flamethrower and the mag rail, or the stun prod and the

Previously in **E**111, **E**125, **E**131







The physics works well, although the rag-doll corpses are a little overdone. Barrels topple, boxes catch fire, and scattered grenades set off spectacular chain reactions





dart gun, and still make it through. The flashier guns may use up more of your ammunition, but you get commensurate bang for your buck. In the end, your preferred weapon set becomes a better indicator of your gaming personality than your hampered plot choices.

Considerably simplified from the first game, the RPG-style character upgrades hinge on you collecting biomod canisters and committing to a combination of stealthy (cloaks and night-vision, for example), brutish (strength boosts and health rechargers) and hi-tech (hacking skills and support drones) upgrades. More innovative are the weapons mods. Pick-ups allow you to customise any of your guns with modules that increase their power or range, silence their shots or improve the efficiency of their ammo use. This is an enormous relief, since even the puniest scientist will take three point-blank pistol rounds to the head before even contemplating falling over. Disappointingly, just as you're becoming seduced with the potential of building up your humble pistol into a bone-fide supergun, it's revealed that there are only two slots available on each weapon. It's a system that might encourage you to carry specialised variants of each gun – a double-powered blaster and a silenced, super-ranged sniper, perhaps – but your limited inventory soon puts paid to that.

You can't fault the detail, but you can fault Ion Storm's priorities. It's a game that's made the effort to name the cat in the secretary's desk photo but not to make jumping work properly, that bothers to script loving exchanges between insignificant NPCs but pits you against clumsy and stuttering AI. Ultimately, *Invisible War* is a very fine game spread too thin. If Ion Storm had condensed its efforts into making more coherence within a smaller world, more subtlety within a tighter story, more consequence within a freer choice, it might have made a marvel.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

Free the bean

The subquests give you a taste of what *Invisible War* might have offered in terms of real freedom. In a nod to the game's Seattle starting point, Alex is soon lured into a turf war between two coffee chains, Quee Quegs and Pequods. Entirely optional, you can choose to ally yourself to the former's underdog desperation or the latter's corporate skulduggery, or try to fleece them both for every dollar going. It's the one part of the game where you feel your decisions are going to stick, and not be countermanded by a shadowy global cult.

Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Tecmo** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$50 (£29)** Release: **Out now (US) 2004 (UK)**





Fighting in close quarters can be frustrating, since many ghosts are only vulnerable for a split second at a time

There's something ever so slightly creepy about twins, even pretty ones. Especially pretty ones. Tecmo is well aware of that, which is why, for the opening of *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly*, it chose to lure sisters Mio and Mayu to a deserted village built on top of an opening into hell.

The bloodstained scraps and mildewed volumes they find there soon reveal that, in order to keep the hell-mouth sealed, the villagers have been regularly sacrificing twin girls. From the scale of the torment unleashed on the village it is evident that the last sacrifice was a spectacular failure.

The twins are sometimes together and sometimes separated, but although you can control each of them at different times, *Crimson Butterfly* is fundamentally Mio's story. Rather than working co-operatively, she must pursue her sister deeper into the village's dark past, protecting her when she finds her and rescuing her when she becomes trapped. Armed with only her spirit camera, which flicks her from thirdperson explore mode to a twin-stick firstperson combat mode, Mio must defeat the ghosts that are clouding the mind of her impressionable sister.

"Ghosts are armed and militant, the carpet of corpses under your feet the result of frenzied carnage, not solemn ceremony"

Crimson Butterfly inherits the first game's atmospherics – the creaking of ropes, the sickening flutter of rotten silk – and adds a new layer of out-and-out violence. Ghosts are armed and militant, the carpet of corpses under your feet the result of frenzied carnage, not solemn ceremony. The story runs a far more ambitious emotional gamut than the shock tactics used by most games in the genre. Each chapter wrings fear, dread, revulsion, apprehension and panic from you. Don't be deceived by the non-violent nature of your camera – the incredible cruelty which is whispered to you in flickering cut scenes means you're fighting for your life.

The camera weapon has evolved considerably, both for good and ill. Instead of rewarding you for keeping ghosts in your sights as long as possible, which previously encouraged you to learn their patterns and hold your nerve, it now powers up your shots according (mostly) to how close you let the spirit get. The loss of the 180-degree quick turn is also keenly felt, especially since the default controller configuration assigns 'turn faster' to a face button, which makes using it in combination with the left stick almost impossible. As a result, few of the battles evolve into the kind of protracted grudge matches that burned ghosts like Blinded into the minds of players of the first game. Shorter, sharper and consequently less dreadful ghost encounters are now far more in your face. Their comically protractec death throes further nibble away at your suspension of disbelief.

Special attacks, which can slow down a ghost or push them back, now recharge automatically during every battle and can consequently be used with more abandon. Your score is boosted by pulling off Fatal Frame combos, prompted by a red flicker o your camera screen. The power-up system remains needlessly over-complicated, but th fully kitted-out camera is a satisfying and magnificent weapon.

This time around, the designers seem even more uneasy about how to integrate traditional videogame puzzles into the careft horror of the story. The tiresome trudge fron A to B to A again makes an unwelcome



As in the first game, longevity comes from replaying to maximise your scores and open up new leve of difficulty. Your efforts are rewarded with unlockable costumes – some more risque than others





The sections where you play as Mayu are monochrome. Without the camera, she is defenceless, but untroubled by the ghosts who beckon her further into the sacrificial halls













The initial story of twin sacrifices is chilling enough, but it soon becomes apparent that the ritual requires one sister to kill the other. Is it better to know in advance if you'll be a killer or a victim?

return, and dulls the terror of unprompted exploration. The supernatural setting seems a sneaky explanation for items that refuse to appear where you know they ought to be until you've triggered a certain specific cut-scene. It's this 'videogameness' that is this videogame's greatest weakness. Instead of having faith in the narrative's power to drive your exploration and the ghosts' dreadfulness to punish your mistakes, they've relied on conventional restarts.

Nothing breaks open the illusion so violently as when you start dreading your own videogame death instead of Mio's real one. Your knowledge of what awaits her is dire, but it can still be eclipsed by the fear of being made to go back and repeat a section. Save points can be widely spaced, and should you have forgotten to use one, a badly handled encounter can set you back tens of minutes. All at once, those delicate moments of queasy nervousness and those deliciously gruesome shocks simply disintegrate. Where half an hour ago you were timid and wide-eyed, on your second time through you're blasé and dismissive.

All of which makes the next criticism seem wildly unjust: *Crimson Butterfly* is too easy. You're likely to be two thirds of the way through the game before you're hurt by anything other than your own over-confidence. It isn't an easy balance to strike, of course. The first game was utterly unforgiving, and rationed health to a point where you could leave yourself in an almost unwinnable position. The sequel over compensates, with even the smallest health pack refilling almost all your energy.

However, if the designers had allowed more generous restart points within the game it would have allowed them to keep the challenging natures of the ghosts without exposing their story to desensitising repetition. *Crimson Butterfly* is a victim of its own success. By creating a story and an atmosphere so far in advance of what we have to come expect from a videogame, it throws harsh light on the conventions we accept without question in lesser titles.

As a horror film, it comes close to the some of the best examples around. As a game, it maps out just how far there is to go in marrying sophisticated narrative and meaningful interactivity.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten



Although most of the visuals are more accomplished than those of the first game, the blankness of the twins' faces make them less engaging than Miku

Onimusha Buraiden

Format: **PlayStation 2** Publisher: **Capcom** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥5,800 (£35)** Release: **Out Now (Japan), May (UK)**





Buraiden's arenas are purely 2D, but clever arrangement of rooftops and rocks helps to disguise the spatial limitations





Franchise spin-offs may often be regarded as the last refuge of the scoundrel, but we mustn't forget that Nintendo once plonked its platforming hero in a go-kart and created a phenomenon.

Onimusha Buraiden was always unlikely to be another *Mario Kart*, especially as Capcom's recent track record in the spin-off stakes includes the dreadful *Resident Evil* *Survivor* games, but extracting a standalone beat 'em up title from the *Onimusha* ore is at least a logical concept.

"Set the battle parameters, and prepare for the kind of balletic carnage that Tarantino will soon be ripping off for volume two of 'Kill Bill'"

Combat in the two *Onimusha* adventure games was necessarily cursory, although its satisfying fizz and fury always suggested there was some scope for extending the fight dynamics. So here Capcom gives you *Onimusha* as a kind of simplified, fourplayer *Soul Calibur*.

All your favourite characters from the *Onimusha* world are here, and should you not have any yet, all you need to know is that Ekei and Kaede provide the slow-but-strong and nimble-but-vulnerable stereotypes to Samanosuke's all-round blokeness. Attack moves are limited to two buttons, but combined with blocking and charging on the shoulder buttons, you can coax out a few simple combos.

More important are the elemental orbs that appear randomly in treasure chests (along with assorted comedy weapons), which can be sucked towards you with the 'X' button and then used to unleash destructive spells. Collapsing corpses leave behind coloured souls for replenishing health, defence or stats, while significant enemies also yield a special death orb which you need to suck up in order for the kill to register. The skill here, as with so many things in life, is to time your sucking correctly. You are vulnerable to attacks while sucking, and other characters can nab your orbs if you're slow on the uptake, involving you in a tug-of-suck. This, however, is as close to strategy as *Buraiden* gets.

Screenshots might suggest three dimensions, but don't be fooled, you're required to jump up and downstage to engage with multiple enemies in 2D. If you're hoping for *Power Stone* in Sengoku-era clothes, you'll be disappointed. *Buraiden's* dynamics veer closer to that loved and lost genre, the side-scrolling beat 'em up, yet the gorgeous graphics and sharp animation gloss nicely over this, and most of the other gameplay shortcomings.



Choose from two lissome female ninjas, a camp troll or, er, Megaman. Capcom's game doesn't take itself too seriously

Story mode is a brief, ten-bout journey through the levels to reach the final showdown with Nobunaga (who is disappointingly easy to beat). Naturally, the expectation is that you play though with ea of the original eight characters, unlocking new weapons and environments while tweaking the abundance of statistics as yo go. This provides an element of variation to the experience – each character faces a slightly different set of enemies in a slightly different order – but it's a lazy, outmoded mechanic that only beat 'em up aficionado will appreciate.

Perhaps there's more actual 'story' her







Blocks and charges combined with sword slashes are your bread and butter, but unleashing spell attacks is your key to victory







than in your average fighting game singleplayer mode, but with no concession to English dialogue in the Japanese release, it's impossible to tell. Anyone who genuinely wants to relate the events of *Buraiden* to the increasingly distant 'real-life' feudal history on which the *Onimusha* series is apparently based – and just how and where does Jubei battering lizard men with a giant pink mallet fit in? – should probably wait until the game is released here (as *Blade Warriors*) in May.

Realistically, *Buraiden*'s biggest appeal lies in the joyous anarchy of the multiplayer modes. Team up two-on-two, three-on-one or every-samurai-for-himself, replace any absent human players with the game's convincing AI, set the battle parameters, and prepare for the kind of balletic carnage that Tarantino will soon be ripping off for volume two of 'Kill Bill'.

Given that the first thing you see in *Buraiden* is a big fat trailer for *Onimusha 3*, you can't help thinking the whole game is little more than, yes, a big fat trailer for *Onimusha 3*. Still, it's a lot of fun with four players, looks great and makes us ever so slightly nostalgic for 1992. Sometimes, that's all you can ask for.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Megaman out of time

Megaman.EXE is the most interesting character to unlock in *Buraiden*, bringing with him as he does a distinct cartoon sensibility as well as his own retro-futuristic arena. Bizarrely, though, he's also the easiest character to find as you only have to complete Story mode once with Samanosuke and then fight Megaman in Versus mode to get him. Other characters to unlock include Megaman Zero, Gogandantess, Magoichi and Nobunaga.

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

Format: **Xbox (version tested) PlayStation2** Publisher: **Acclaim** Developer: **Blask Isle** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (UK)**













The workshop allows you to build magical weapons and artifacts to your particular specifications. Sadly, this can prove rather too expensive for casual experimentation...





...which can easily lead to cheating. The ability to import characters into the game seems to exist purely to allow players to replicate powerful items and artificially boost experience points

The luckiest *Halo* players were those who took the game home and sat down with a friend to co-operate their way through. It's a simple equation. Killing stuff is fun – killing stuff with your friends is more fun. The original *Dark Alliance* revelled in forging your character into a monumental badass and doing so with your friends. *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance 2* has changed the formula little. Good thing, surely?

Porting the *Baldur's Gate* franchise to the console market was a case of reducing a complex and sprawling quest to the sort of pick-up-and-play experience required by those lacking the 200 hours the PC versions demanded. What was once a pleasing console compromise now seems overly restrictive post-*KOTOR*. Despite hints at moral choices and a dusting of side-quests, it soon boils down to a straight slog, mashing the 'A' button as you wander through prettily rendered – if largely linear – dungeons.

Worse, despite having been graphically massaged into something more pleasing, the level design of *Dark Alliance 2* lacks its prequel's inspiration. Although there are some open-plan levels, most of your adventuring is done in a series of bizarrely laid out, yet very straight, lines. Managing simultaneously to become more linear and yet more unwieldy, the desire to see what lies in every nook and cranny can evaporate in a hail of backtracking and confusion. That said, this quest is on a far greater scale than its predecessor, which is reflected in the variety of backdrops, the range of enemies, and in the levels your characters can attain. Extreme mode returns for those who complete their initial task, and by the conclusion of that second quest your avatar will have become a truly terrifying opponent with statistics to make D&D purists grind their dice with disquieting menace.

Despite the indisputable pleasures of beating up endless ranks of enemies with ever more extravagant weapons and spells, even with a friend by your side you will soon be longing for some kind of influence over both story and character beyond ultra violence, bigger swords and spinning around really quickly. If it had married the feeling of involvement found in *KOTOR* with its own hack-and-slash gameplay, *Dark Alliance 2* could have been truly special. It remains a jolly jaunt of epic scale for adventuring couples but lacks the spark of creativity to lift it above the rank of a confidently realised *Gauntlet* remake.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

I-Ninja

Format: **PS2** Publisher: **SCEE** Developer: **Argonaut** Price: **£40** Release: **February 13** Previously in **E**125, **E**132

Argonaut's latest platformer is certainly a curious brew. You get the impression that loads of ideas have been thrown into the pot but, unfortunately, none of the weaker ones have been rejected.

Ratchet & Clank, *Jak & Daxter*, *Super Mario Sunshine* and *Ape Escape* are obvious inspirations, but there's also a dash of *Super Monkey Ball* and a smidgen of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* in here. With *I-Ninja*, one thing's for certain: you won't just be jumping across ever-widening chasms. But does diversity equal fun?

Significantly, *I-Ninja* is at its best when you're treated to something fresh – the small touches like building up your character's momentum on half-pipes, punching a mechanised goblin in the face or slingshotting your way around convoluted, twisty-turny tracks. Less gratifying are the elements that feel like simple rip-offs rather than knowing homages: the dull boat-shooting FPS game, the flaccid boss battles and the unnecessary, and typically tedious, stealth sections seem like they've been included just because of some 2002 marketing graph. They undermine the more inspired sections.

Ultimately, no one cares if a game copies from another source if the design remains as vital and enjoyable as the original. Take the giant rolling eyeball section as an example. There's no doubt it adds variety to the mix and is mildly entertaining in its own right, but it's not a patch on the glorious inertial handling dynamic of *Super Monkey Ball*. And, like a lot of recent hotchpotch titles, *I-Ninja* delivers a series of decent minigames, but not one of them elevates the spirit.

Structurally, *I-Ninja* does show some imagination. Levels within a series of hub worlds must be unlocked, but this can only be achieved by collecting tokens that upgrade the hero's belt. A yellow belt grants access to yellow areas, a blue belt to blue areas, and so on. It's a clever way of concealing the game's inherent linearity, and adds another layer to the protagonist's perky personality. Less welcome is the simple combat that, despite the game's attempt to implement some obligatory combos, never gets beyond pressing 'X' in quick succession.

Professionally produced and lovingly crafted it may be, but the most damning criticism of *I-Ninja* is this: lose all your lives at the end of a level and you won't be thrilled about having to do it all again.

Edge rating: Six out of ten









In one of the minigames you must destroy waves of boats before they reach the beach. It's repetitive, and not very challenging



To complement the combos, *I-Ninja* has four Rage abilities which can be accessed by pressing the D-pad buttons. However, like much of the combat, the effects feel shallow and inconsequential



Remote rockets

One of the more novel elements in the game is the opportunity to remotely direct rockets around the levels to blast open barriers. Like many aspects of *I-Ninja*, it's not a wholly original idea but it is well incorporated into the fabric of the game. On a less positive note, the designers decided to punish players by chucking them out of a level after losing an arbitrary number of lives. Why?

R: Racing Evolution

Format: GC (version tested) PS2 Publisher: Namco Developer: In-house Price: ¥6,800 (£35) Release: Out now (Japan) TBA (UK) Previously in E12









Graphics are functional rather than spectacular, and car models are acceptable. It's not just the road that is angular – most of the game environment feels that way





The handling's reliance on lift-off oversteer can be mastered but lacks finesse and feels dated when compared to the competition. Racing points collected during events unlock extras and more cars

Once upon a track

Racing Life attempts the uncomfortable marriage of racing and narrative, and sees an ambulance driver slide into the overalls of the racing driver she's just delivered to hospital. Key plot sequences utilise good CGI, while secondary developments rely on static images. While it is unlikely to win awards, the story does at least add a little spice by delving into some of the political issues affecting the world of motorsport.

Although also available for the PS2, this is an important release for Nintendo. The odd F1 title aside, format-exclusive real-world racing games haven't fared particularl well on the company's home consoles and are arguably a contributing factor to the lightweight status many attribute to NCL's hardware. *F-Zero GX* may be excellent, but i their minds it hardly matches powersliding a GT-R in *GT3* or thrashing an Enzo in *PGR2*.

Namco's latest may not have been signe as a Nintendo exclusive but with its licensed vehicles, genuine performance specialists' logos, and a handful of real circuits (alongsid fictitious alternatives), it joins the likes of *Burnout 2* and *NFS Underground* in an effor to present the GameCube to the wider gaming circles as a platform capable of offering quality realism-influenced racing.

Except, sadly, quality is the one thing *R: Racing Evolution* doesn't possess much c Initially things look promising, the main mode managing the (admittedly easy) task of overtaking *TOCA Race Driver* for integrating plot into racing (see 'Once upon a track') an offering a pleasantly varied racing menu – ovals, rally stages, overtaking challenges, drag races, super special stages and international events, to name the first few. There are some interesting touches, too, wit team orders coming into effect (the pit radio crackles incessantly) and the ability to force opponents into mistakes, not that you'll necessarily need to, given the manner in which they jerk out of your way as soon as you attempt an overtaking manoeuvre.

That's the game's first weakness – it's simply too easy. Even with the driving aids switched off a competent player will power through the events and will feel bored before feeling challenged, particularly as too often t same venues are revisited with the number c laps cruelly extended.

Then there's the handling. There's little feeling of contact with the track and the bac end whips out in the most awkward manner seen in a racing game for a long while. It's also worth pointing out that the collision dynamics display a set of physical propertie foreign to followers of Newton's work.

For a title trying hard to inject personality into the genre, the experience feels irreparat mechanical. There's plenty of variety in term of racing categories and machinery, but the overall lack of refinement and involvement is inexcusable.

Edge rating: Four out of t

Pac-Man Vs

Format: **GC/GBA** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **Namco** Price: **Free with certain Namco releases** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)** Previously in **E**125

We can only assume that the bottom's dropped out of the ball-cock business. Mario has resorted to some odd day jobs in his time, but commentating on *Pac-Man Vs* must be one of his duller gigs. "Pac-Man atea-powera-dot," he yodels over and over as years of Namco and Nintendo tradition collide in a happy tangle of nostalgia, innovation and vicious competition.

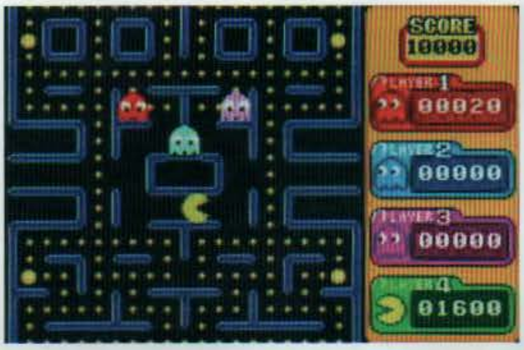
Pac-Man Vs represents the dawning of what could be a brief new age. It's the first game that absolutely requires a linked-up combination of GameCube and Game Boy Advance, and it more than justifies the expense and the hassle of the set-up. Of the two to four players, one must play on a GBA as Pac-Man, the others as ghosts on the split main screen. Pac-Man gets a traditional viewpoint on his personal screen, able to chart the progress of all the ghosts as he pill-pops his way to victory. The ghosts have a much more tightly zoomed view, able to see only a fraction of the maze at a time. The odds are squared by the 'Tron' lightbike-style trail that Pac-Man leaves, allowing the ghosts to catch a glimpse of his progress as he passes by. Other than that, the rules are as they ever were.

Except you've never played Pac-Man against such smart ghosts before. There's no patterns to be learned here. Instead, the possibilities for co-ordination and three-way pincer manoeuvres mean whoever is in custody of the GBA will have a hard battle to complete the level before he's caught. The relative speeds of Pac and his pursuers are perfectly calibrated and, once on his trail, the ghosts eke inexorably closer to him as he strains to reach a power dot in time.

Whoever wins – Pac by finishing the dots, a ghost by catching him – gets to take over the GBA, which means that by the end of a session a thick plait of cables will testify to the fierce and delighted rivalry the game provokes. Grudge matches are fuelled by a points system that has victors stealing points from the losers. The first to an agreed maximum takes the crown.

Given away free with Namco's current Japanese and US releases, *Pac-Man Vs* could hardly have barer bones. No options menu, no game modes and no hi-score tables are included here, and as a consequence there's nothing to dilute the strength of the original idea or the subtle excellence of its execution.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten













If a ghost player eats the fruit that periodically appears, their viewpoint zooms out, giving them a better view of the level and a brief but nevertheless substantial advantage



There are always three ghosts, however many players are taking part. Computer-controlled spooks remain grey and neutral until touched by a player ghost, which turns them into an ally. In terms of levels, the original coin-op's appears, and it's joined by five new creations

1080° Avalanche

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **NST** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**119, **E**125









No question about it, the off-balance meter is silly. Land badly and you'll need to quickly rotate the analogue stick to keep momentum up. It spoils the experience by turning a crash into an inappropriate minigame



Bonus boards

Completing challenges means new and better boards become available to your chosen character. These include the superfast Rocket board and the Mr Beaks board (a penguin with a squeak). With each of the characters you can also unlock an alter-ego boarder, so there's some incentive to play the game through several times. Frosty Winterball is **Edge**'s favourite, if only because he's the fattest snowboarder ever.





Speed is conveyed superbly, and it's important to cushion landings from high drops by holding in the 'L' shoulder trigger. Gate Challenge (right) is the game's strongest and most enduring mode



This is the third snowboarding game to be released in as many months – and it's possibly the best. On the one hand there's th hyperactive *SSX3*, boasting thousands of accessories and multiple game modes; and on the other there's the chilled-out excellence of *Amped 2*, with its emphasis firmly on exploration and trick scoring. *1080° Avalanche* is different again.

At first, you'll be cursing that it doesn't offer the same analogue sensitivity or as riveting a Match Race as the N64 original. The main mode (which can be completed in little more than two hours) is underwhelming. Just when you're beginning to get the hang o *Avalanche*'s control method, and outrun the brilliantly orchestrated snow-slides, the credit roll and you're left with only the game's three other singleplayer modes: Gate Challenge, Trick Attack and Time Trial.

But it's here that *Avalanche* begins to surprise, and to show its true depth. Gate Challenge is particularly good, and slaloming between gates is both a thrilling experience and a glorious example of an expertly implemented risk/reward mechanic. Time Tria is equally absorbing, encouraging players to explore by collecting the five coins secreted around the well-designed courses in the quickest time possible. Trick Attack is weake but once you come to terms with the combo timing system it offers the delights of pulling off a septuplet backflip and a frontside 2,160

Speed is communicated exceptionally well, with a combination of a high framerate, novel screen juddering effect and glorious SFX. Indeed, *Avalanche* imparts the varying depths of snow, anything from sheet ice to knee-deep drifts, much better than its neares rivals. Crouching for speed, leaping precipice and then absorbing the shock upon landing (with a press of the 'L' trigger) is a majestic sensation only bettered by the original.

While *Avalanche*'s learning curve is beautifully judged, the game is not without its flaws. Hitting obstacles can cause your boarder to stop dead, which not only looks silly but can sometimes leave him struggling to get going again. There's also grinding and off-balance meters that are at odds with the finely nuanced control elsewhere.

Despite these minor imperfections, *Avalanche* delivers one of the year's most addictive arcade-style experiences and confidently overcomes early criticisms. It doesn't deserve to be overlooked.

Edge rating: Eight out of te

Gran Turismo 4 Prologue

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEI** Developer: **Polyphony Digital Inc** Price: **¥2,500 (£13)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)** Previously in **E131**

SCEI's original marketing plans may have banked on the full *GT4* being finished in time for Christmas 2003, as announced at last year's E3; presumably this is plan B, a pre-release 'taster', its presence justified with some spin about the complexity of the full game requiring an introductory demo so as to allow players' brains to adapt to the game's otherwise unreasonable demands on hand-eye coordination, and bolstered by the neatly timed emergence of a special-edition *GT4 Prologue* PS2 pack into Akihabara's stores.

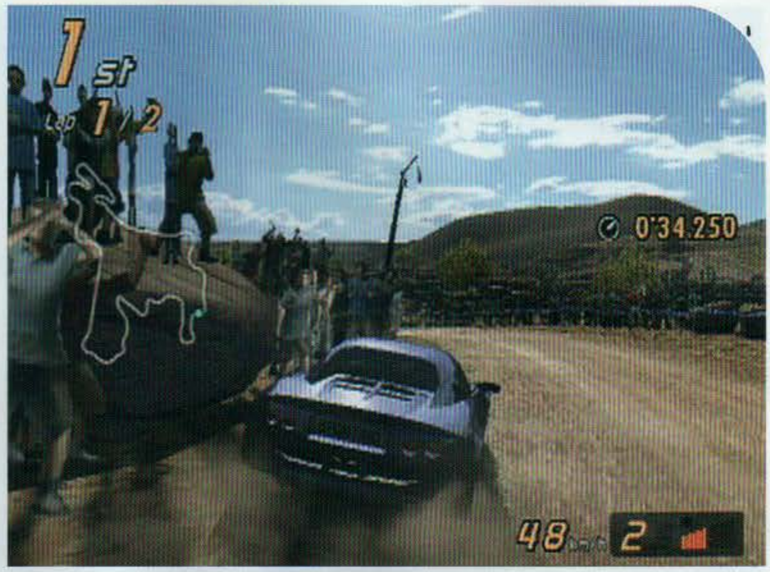
A shame, then, that for the most part the experience proves so underwhelming. It's not the handling's fault – the physics model has been tweaked and generally feels substantially closer to the real-world vehicle behaviour Polyphony has been attempting to emulate for the past six years. On the track, and particularly during rally sections, the pendulum effect is noticeable as the rear end feels far more lively than in previous iterations, while turn-in ability is also more realistic and therefore less immediate – most apparent when using Logitech's Driving Force Pro wheel (featuring a 900-degree turning circle) designed specifically for the game. This increase in authenticity makes this the hardest *GT* title to drive yet, but also the most rewarding when mastered.

Less genuine is the behaviour of the AI opposition available here. Admittedly, these are only encountered during some rounds of the tutorial mode (see 'Structural weakness'). Their purpose is to offer a moving chicane to be negotiated, and as such they may not be representative of the on-track performance in the final game. Having rarely come across such brainless examples of CPU-controlled racers, we certainly hope this is the case.

Having read all that and looked at the score below, you'll no doubt feel disheartened, particularly when considering **Edge**'s consistently high regard for Polyphony's driving series. And you have reason to be. While we expect the 'real' *GT4* to continue the evolution seen in its predecessors, the reality is that even the most devoted *GT* aficionado will fail to get much enjoyment from *Prologue*. It's a dry, uninvolving drive that deliberately fails to include the core of the franchise's fundamental components and, ultimately, an unnecessary SCEI marketing coup that could end up doing little to attract *GT* virgins while leaving veterans feeling deflated.

Edge rating: Five out of ten













Those hoping the game would finally feature visual damage will be bitterly disappointed. While cars remain intact, severe impacts are now punished by a ten-second stint limited to a crippling 50kph



Graphically, *Prologue* pushes the PS2 architecture to its limit and, as occasionally evident from scenery pop-up, beyond it



Structural weakness

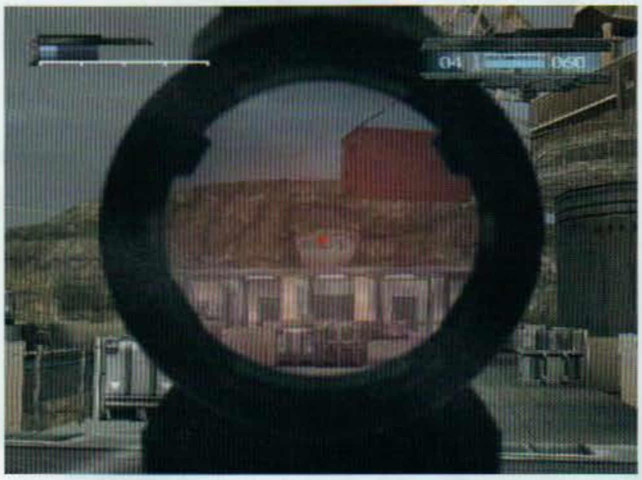
Prologue is split into two sections. Arcade mode allows drives around a curtailed selection of tracks (including a Grand Canyon rally stage, New York and North African street courses and two Japanese race circuits). Your time here is spent on your own against the clock, which further contributes to the game's sterile feel. School mode offers more variety but its insistence on forcing the player back to basics can prove unbearably tedious.

kill.switch

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£40** Release: **February 20** Previously in **E125**, **E131**, **E13**









Every gun has a scope, and a firstperson aim to bring it up. It's a pleasingly accurate method of dispatch, but exposes you to fire



Duck shoot

The Blindfire technique involves shooting above crates and around corners without actually exposing yourself. It's a clever luxury, allowing you to exchange large amounts of ammo and accuracy for safety, but it's one you'll rarely call on. It always feels easier, and only slightly more risky, to just pop up from your hiding place for a half a second and empty a clip directly at anyone in clear enough view.



The protagonist is 'controlled' remotely, much like a game character. Cue self-referencing that feels as if it should be accompanied with a winking smiley: "You want me to stay and work on my high score?"

With so many games nowadays wearin ambition like a crown of thorns, a single-minded focus on just one core idea is as good as a change. And so it is with *kill.switch*: you take cover behind some crat or a corner, enemies scuttle in from the distance taking up their own defensive positions, and a stuttered firefight ensues. And repeat. It's real-*Time Crisis*.

Things are initially good. Bullets are pinpoint, and aiming is smooth and accurat The Blindfire option (see 'Duck shoot') is ne as is the *Halo*-esque health system that forces you to seek cover the moment you come under attack. Just as the levels in *Manhunt* are honeycombs of light and shadow, *kill.switch*'s stages are Lego stacks of crates and corners, a playground of strategic cowardice. Anything wider than yo legs or higher than your hips can be used tc hide behind while you consider what to sho next, allowing you to battle as you see fit.

The opening section of an early level is a motif for the entire game. You enter a warehouse filled with uneven rows of crates enemies pour in, and you pop up when the opportunity arises to take each one out with considered burst of gunfire, then move on to the next crate-filled warehouse. And that's *kill.switch*'s biggest problem. It seems churli to be criticising a game's repetition when th review opened with praise for single-mindec focus, but it can't be helped. You know how *Halo* is supposedly the same 30 seconds o gameplay repeated over and over? Well, *kill.switch* is the same two seconds repeate ad infinitum. It doesn't get any more frantic a the game progresses, it's just easier to die.

Your fragility, coupled with the absence o restart points, can bite during the later levels where it's all too easy to be blindsided by a cunning/lucky enemy grunt, or pulped by an unannounced grenade. Stationary guns in particular are a millisecond massacre, the equivalent of *Conflict: Desert Storm*'s tanks, and straying out in the open in front of one i a death sentence.

For once, it's a game that can be excus its blocky, similar environments. However, w huge gun lust driving the show, it's a shame that there's very little damage and destructio dealt out to the objects in the levels. When the coast has cleared, it's still a commendab brazen and unfussy shooter, featuring one continuous dialogue of throwaway gunfire and nothing else.

Edge rating: Six out of t

Astro Boy: Tetsuwan Atom

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Treasure** Price: **¥4,980 (£25)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBA (UK)** Previously in **E**129

As a developer, Treasure's greatest skill is its ability to think big. And small. And tiny. And ENORMOUS. *Astro Boy*'s inventive heritage, and the GBA's 2D capabilities, provide the perfect foundation for a masterclass in imaginative flair and precision-engineered game mechanics.

The control scheme is tight but flexible, with instinctive access to boosts, lasers and your trusty backside-mounted machine gun. Treasure then toys with scale, gravity and expectations as side-scrolling sequences of enemies attack – some shrunk to microscopic size, some inflated into pixelly nightmares. The boss roster is inevitably vast, but most are defeated by quick thumbs and adaptable skills rather than repetitive rote-learning.

Instead of forming two faces of the same game, the gulf between Easy and Hard modes enforces radically different gameplay. Easy, with its generous special attacks, familiarises you with levels and bosses. Hard puts what you've learned to the test, and high scores, time attacks and unlockables fuel your long-term quest for perfection. The GBA is beginning to feel all grown up.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten









Stages end with the chance to upgrade one aspect of your powers, and your playing style will become increasingly specialised as you choose to rely more heavily on long-range lasers, high-speed jet boosts, or one-on-one fisticuffs

Sega GT Online

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Wow Entertainment** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now**



It's *Sega GT 2002* upgraded with Live modes. The game plays in an identical fashion to the earlier title, but with real people instead of AIs to race against







The title gives it away: this is *Sega GT 2002* with Live compatibility. In terms of handling it's therefore as accomplished and enjoyable as its offline precursor (see **E**116) and so this review invariably focuses on the online aspects. Up to 12 players can race, although the number of tracks is dependent on the number of participants (a tenplayer round **Edge** took part in offered a choice of only three circuits). Interestingly, you can also trade or, if you're feeling confident, bet your cars and tuning components with fellow competitors.

On Live, the experience is similar to that of the offline mode, although the juddering noticeable when close to other vehicles is annoying, if not significant enough to ruin the proceedings. Of more concern are the collision dynamics, which can feel unfair (and frustrating) due to the more aggressive nature of playing against human opponents.

Ultimately, owners of *Sega GT 2002* should ask themselves whether a handful of new elements and the online component are worth the investment (even at the reduced price). Everyone else can safely add a point to the score.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Rogue Ops

Format: **PS2, GC, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Kemco** Developer: **Bits Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **February 6** Previously in **E12**









It's not that *Rogue Ops* has stolen from *Splinter Cell*, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Thief* that grates, it's that those strong ideas have been diluted and abused. Usually, discovery by guards means game over: a screen you'll have to endure many times

Let's deal with the positives first: *Rogue Ops* contains some neat gadgets. The fly-cam, grappling hook and retina scanner, among others at least give the game pretensions of innovation. Problem is, they're built into an over-arching desig which is unsympathetic and rigid beyond belief.

Indeed, *Rogue Ops* is an object lesson in how not to do stealth. Everything in the game – securit guard patrols, event triggers, enemy AI – works lik clockwork, so any mistake means you have to go through the same laborious procedure again. Waiting for an enemy to reach his mark before you can sneak past is excruciatingly tedious when you're forced to do it for the umpteenth time.

Worse: Kemco seems to expect a clairvoyant level of perception from the player at several point in the story. Many of the puzzles are illogical, poor signposted or just daft. Objects that can be interacted with are circled with an icon, but this only appears if you are looking at exactly the right spot. Indeed, much of *Rogue Ops* is spent trying to make this cursed cursor appear. It's not a pleasant way to spend an evening.

Edge rating: Two out of te

Dynasty Warriors 4: Xtreme Legends

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **THQ** Developer: **KOEI** Price: **£25** Release: **January 23**

The giddy glory of being a one-man army – that warrior worth a thousand – is still as attractive and consuming as it's ever been, and will see Koei in good stead as it turns its attentions to another segment of eastern history with its inaugural Sengokumusou game. This closing chapter of the *Dynasty Warriors* series is admittedly a neat full stop, an exhausting book-end for the enthusiasts, but it offers exactly the same baby step forwards as every other sequel-cum-update.

It's still the biggest beat 'em up bustle ever realised, and the fact the formula remains enjoyable despite this many updates is as much a testament to the robustness of the concept as it is to the conservatism of it all. When a franchise is this established and cemented, and the fans so comfortably wired in, the best review is just a list of new features: you can rear a character in *DW4:XL* and then import them to *DW4*, as well as import new weapons and two new extremes of difficulty.

It's not so much a primer for Koei's next series as, perhaps, a cry for it. No more, then, than just another little bit of history repeating.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









There's a trio of new modes: Legend features a specific set-piece level for each of the 42 characters; Xtreme randomly generates short stages; and Arena proffers up some bland enduranc challenges. The core of the crowd-contr combat remains as unmoved as ever

Arc: Twilight of the Spirits

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEE** Developer: **Cattle Call** Price: **£40** Release: **January 30**

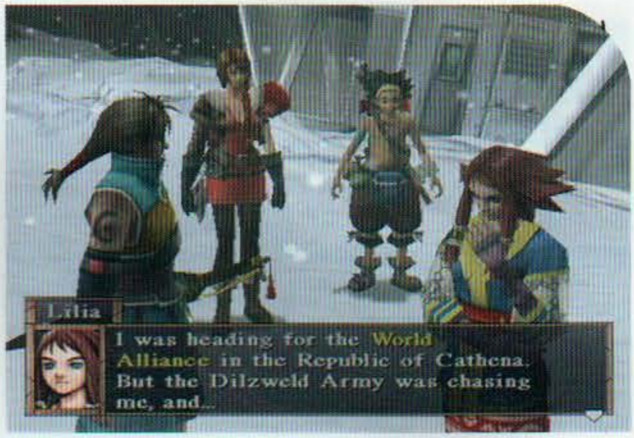
Previously a Japanese *Arc the Lad* title, *Twilight of the Spirits* is still resolutely adolescent in both tone and execution. Possibly the most interesting thing about the game is the way it divides its narrative episodically between the perspectives of its two half-brother protagonists. Apart from that twist, it just slavishly imitates the most average traits of the most average RPG. This is by-the-numbers design at its most uninspired and, while it passes the time, it never really elevates the emotions in the way that great titles do.

The whole thing is further undermined by a couple of design flaws. Combat is rudimentary and boring, the encounters descend into monotonous contests in which blows are traded back and forth without any real tactical consideration or interesting game mechanics or systems to enliven them. The Muzak accompaniment, meanwhile, is never less than terrifying in its tedious blandness, and save points are positioned with little thought as to how they might regulate the progress of the game, or minimise frustration for that matter. In fact, it's so bland it's almost offensive.

Edge rating: Four out of ten









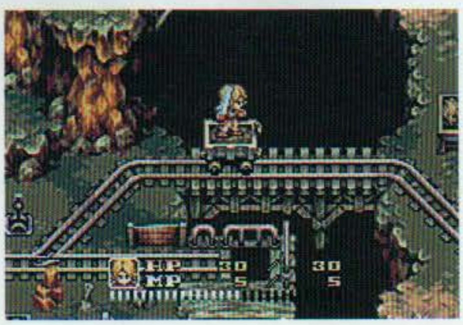
It's a shame to see such a mediocre title as *Arc* localised for a western audience when there's such an untapped wealth of Japanese RPGs begging to be converted. But the translation here can't be faulted, and must have taken considerable effort

Sword of Mana

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **Square-Enix** Developer: **Square-Enix/Brownie Brown** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E125**









All the ingenuity of the past games' bosses has been replaced with appallingly simple AI routines. By far the strongest elements of the game are the levelling-up and equipment sections

Ever since the seminal SNES *Secret of Mana*, *Seiken Densetsu* fans have had it hard. The stunning third game eluded the west, while the fourth game, *Legend of Mana* on PlayStation, confused and disorientated fans.

This GBA update bases itself on the very first Game Boy iteration, known in the west as *Final Fantasy Adventure*, rather than the second game so beloved of many, but this is hardly a point for negative criticism. Unfortunately, other elements offer themselves up for that contempt. At first glance this is a beautiful game, but closer inspection reveals limp animation and other issues. Likewise, the computer companion's execrable AI hinders rather than helps the quest.

The 8bit-simple story is endearing, and the complexities of battle and levelling up are deep and exciting. It's a good 20 hours of GBA play, but we were hoping for a passionate demonstration of Square's rekindling love for the RPG craft. Instead, *Sword of Mana* hangs around its competitors in relative mediocrity instead of blazing the trail the SNES title did all those years ago.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Trackmania

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Digital Jesters** Developer: **Nadeo** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now**









The editing tools provided aren't pretty, but they're intuitive enough. Tracks can be placed in three dimensions, and every course needs to be validated, by playing it, before being saved for distribution

Here comes the backlash. As the differences between racing games become indistinct, it takes a brave and special game to change the formula. *Trackmania* is nearly that game.

The concept is close to genius. Take the structure of *Stunt Car Racer*, build a track, race it, then put it on the web. Without an internet connection, *Trackmania* would seem average. Three environments are included, each with their own challenges, and you can race against the cloc or slot track segments into almost-complete puzzl paths and try to reach the finish, but there are not enough tracks. This is forgivable, because...

...completing each challenge is rewarded with cash. New obstacles and tarmac can be bought from the shop to construct your own courses. A full, nefarious, loop-the-loop-enabled delight is about 25Kb, perfect for transferring through email, instant messaging, or storing in a web archive. Right now, the online exchange that *Trackmania* needs doesn't exist, but the community is growing by word of mouth. This is clever gaming, and in six months time it could be enormous.

Edge rating: Seven out of te

F-Zero Falcon Densetsu

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥5,800 (£30)** Release: **Out now (Japan)** Previously in **E**131

Comparisons with *Gran Turismo 4 Prologue* are not completely erroneous, as *F-Zero Falcon* feels like a starter before the main course. There is a singleplayer campaign here, but it's over far too quickly – mainly because the difficulty curve has been severely misjudged. Indeed, you won't even break a sweat before you get to the Silver Cup in the Expert class, and *F-Zero* stalwarts will feel patronised by the ease at which this short-lived Tournament mode can be completed.

The Zero Test and Story modes are much better, but as they consist of mini-challenges they feel unsatisfying. They're a bit like taking the series of licence tests in *Prologue* – something you either love or hate – and certainly not cutting-edge entertainment. On a positive note, *F-Zero Falcon* makes use of the GBA SP's clam design and controls superbly, and once the benefits of boosting and air-braking (using the shoulder buttons) are mastered you'll feel completely at one with your machine. However, once the short main mode is finished, all you're left with is the prospect of racing yourself for ever-quicker lap times.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









In truth, the plot of *Falcon*'s Story mode was lost on Edge, but it's fair to say that the mini-challenges lack excitement. In the singleplayer tournament there are 29 other racers on the track, but you'll only feel challenged by five or six of them

Magatama

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Microsoft Game Studios** Price: **¥6,800 (£36)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)** Previously in **E**126, **E**127

Clearly, it's easier to say something is an *Otogi* clone than it is to actually make one. While the historical pageantry, supernatural splendour and mannered carnage are all evident in *Magatama*, their impact is dulled by repetition and frustration.

Combat is simply a matter of clobbering the 'B' button, and the increasingly acrobatic combos that are automatically unleashed are little compensation for your bored brain and strained tendons. Once you've softened an enemy up enough, it becomes possible to target them with your spectral sidekick. This can be enormously satisfying, and there's an incongruous ten-pin delight as he smashes through a huddle of lesser enemies on the way to his target.

Nevertheless, it soon becomes apparent that your lumbering opponents are less bother to avoid than to bash, and it becomes an exercise in sprinting in circles as you ignore the re-spawning drones and figure out which enemies will unlock the next area. At the end of each section a boss awaits whose job it is to reveal the full extent of the camera's deficiencies and the combat's tedium. It's a job it does too well.

Edge rating: Four out of ten









Once your sidekick is fully gorged on enemy energy – which, thanks to the respawning, is often – you can trigger a blazing special attack that, for a brief moment, takes the game close to glory

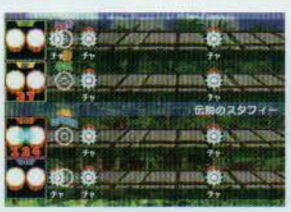
Donkey Konga

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£36)** Release: **Out now (Japan)** Previously in **E**130





There are three levels of difficulty in *Donkey Konga*, but only the hardest will provide any challenge to experienced rhythm-action players. A minigame sees Kong collecting fruit on vines, controlled by judicious and repetitious drumming





While rumours of rhythm-action's death appear to have been greatly overstated, it is curious Nintendo has taken this long to enter a field which suits its demographic down to the ground. There is nothing complex about *Donkey Konga*, just the careful application of structured fun to that most comical of musical devices: bongos. Dozens of pieces of music (including J-pop, samba and themes from Nintendo games past and present) come with a bongo pattern the player must match.

Different-coloured beats signal a strike to the left or right side of the bongos, both at once, or a clap of the hands. The latter provides *Donkey Konga*'s most charming moments, since the thought process required to lift both hands and clap often proves bewildering. That confusion causes panic, panic causes hysteria, and hysteria is exactly what players want from party games. It's far too easy for veterans in singleplayer, but with four sets of the ludicrous peripheral – an unlikely scenario, admittedly – and each player tapping out their own interlinking rhythm the game becomes a uniquely entertaining experience.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Viewpoint

Edge takes a fresh look at a seminal game classic from yesteryear

Format: **Neo-Geo MVS/AES/CD** Publisher: **SNK America** Developer: **Sammy** Release: **1992** Size: **74Mb**





Everything in *Viewpoint* seems 'miniaturised', even if the action is far from small. Effectively 3D, the use of the hardware is profound, everything being spot on in terms of collision detection

Financial equality in life has never been a reality. For videogames, the same is often true, particularly with some of the fringe systems – Marty, Engine, etc. Those affluent enough to own, and more importantly feed, a Neo-Geo AES will know of its relationship with luxurious shooting software, as both *ASOII* and this year's astounding horizontal blaster, *Last Resort*, effortlessly prove.

Joining the fray is *Viewpoint*, Sammy's practical rebirth of Sega's isometric shooter *Zaxxon*. Set at an identical angle, the player takes command of a typical craft on a typical one-against-the-odds mission. But that is where the similarities end.

The visuals alone are worth the £250 price tag. Rendered in 3D but redrawn on the AES' 2D hardware they work magnificently, and everything has a charming, almost toy-like feel that wouldn't look out of place on a top-end development workstation.

However, this perception dissolves within ten seconds of play, as *Viewpoint* is merciless. Where other hardcore examples of the genre may spend one or two stages establishing the difficulty level, Sammy's game is violent and nasty from the outset, loading layer upon layer of fire on the player. The slow pace often seems hectic simply by virtue of the game's punishing nature.

Moreover, the set designs often require demolition or activation in order to carry on, adding a wonderful tactical element to the proceedings. Add to this smart bombs and a chargeable laser (as in *R-Type*) and, while things may seem bleak, there is always a way through. Enemies follow strict patterns, so memorising these levies an advantage, and providing the player has lightning reflexes and an icy disposition reaching that final, fifth boss is always possible.

Irrespective of its impenetrability, *Viewpoint* is a hugely enjoyable game with striking graphics, oodles of strategic latitude and a soundtrack of the funkiest kind. It's the perfect way for shooter experts to display their skills, but make no mistake, Sammy's game is a brutal affair, crushing all in its path. Those who can't last past level two should consider themselves POWs.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten







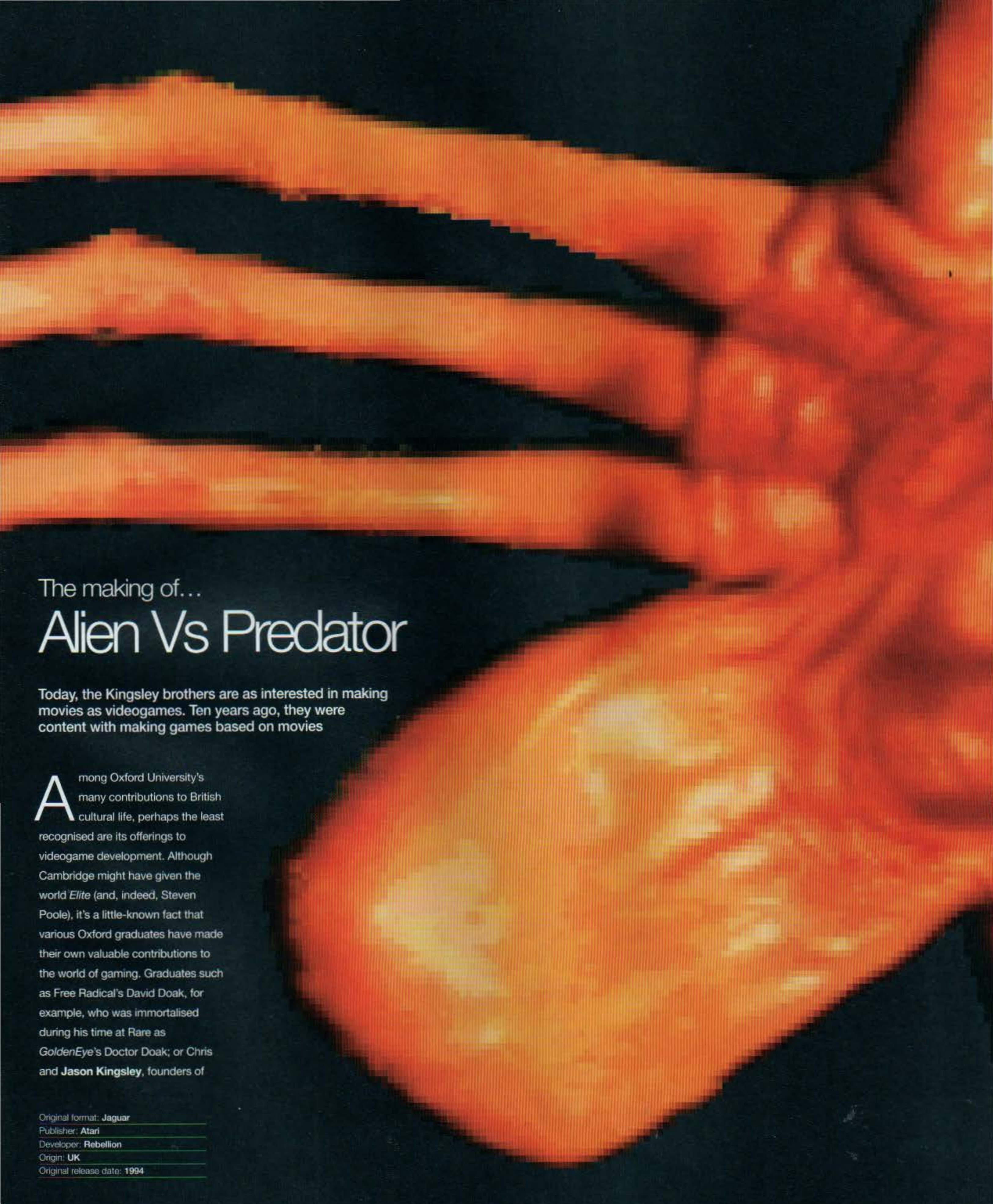
Fortunately, hitting objects doesn't have any ill effects unless the ship is trapped or forced from the screen, which results in a lost life. The bosses are predictably huge, and require extended battering



Retrospective

Still one of the killers of the genre, time hasn't softened *Viewpoint's* edges in the slightest. A standard bearer for the platform, the price of the AES cart version has peaked around £400, despite the equally excellent Neo-Geo CD version and ports for Mega Drive, PlayStation and Saturn (the latter cancelled). Bar perhaps *Gaiares* for the Mega Drive, this is one of the most cruel shooters available, but all the more singular and intense for it. If you struggled with *Mars Matrix* or *Hellfire*, you might as well not bother.





The making of…

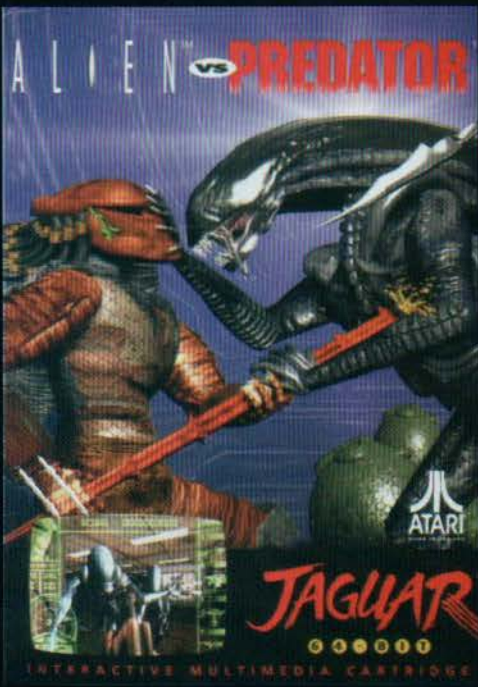
Alien Vs Predator

Today, the Kingsley brothers are as interested in making movies as videogames. Ten years ago, they were content with making games based on movies

Among Oxford University's many contributions to British cultural life, perhaps the least recognised are its offerings to videogame development. Although Cambridge might have given the world *Elite* (and, indeed, Steven Poole), it's a little-known fact that various Oxford graduates have made their own valuable contributions to the world of gaming. Graduates such as Free Radical's David Doak, for example, who was immortalised during his time at Rare as *GoldenEye*'s Doctor Doak; or Chris and **Jason Kingsley**, founders of

Original format: **Jaguar**
Publisher: **Atari**
Developer: **Rebellion**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **1994**





Unlike earlier videogames based on the 'Alien' and 'Predator' licences, *AVP* dispensed with the side-scrolling conventions

Rebellion. Having acquired cult sci-fi comic '2000AD' a couple of years ago the Kingsleys, still based in Oxford, currently employ some 60 people across operations that encompass videogames, comic books and even movie development.

It all started in rather more humble circumstances when Rebellion was set up in order to create a launch title for the Atari Jaguar. *Alien Vs Predator* never quite made that launch slot, but the fact that 84 per cent of Jaguar owners bought the game would appear to suggest that it was worth the wait.

While Chris had been focusing on completing a DPhil in chemistry his brother, Jason, had somehow managed to find the time to build up the sort of varied CV that you'd expect from an institution that regularly turns out captains of industry and British prime ministers.

After completing his degree in zoology, Jason had managed to write a few children's books, do some fashion photography in London and work as a camera assistant on the odd music video. He'd also been involved in making several videogames, such as *Blade Warrior* for Mirrorsoft's Imageworks label, isometric adventure *Murder* for US Gold, shooter *Better Dead than Alien* and *Hunt for Red October* from Oxford Digital.

It was with this experience that the brothers decided to pitch themselves to Atari, putting together a demo of their 3D work with a tiny team of other freelancers. "Chris and I were working from our student basement," points out **Jason Kingsley**. "The only natural light had to travel down a coal hole before it could be seen – ideal conditions to see the screen, though, and almost an *AVP* environment in itself! When we got the deal we had to set up the company and get going pretty fast."

For such a relatively small and inexperienced team, the task that they'd set themselves was a considerable one: "Nobody had ever built this sort of title before. There were no control standards, no assumed knowledge, the Jaguar was an unknown quantity, the team size was only six people, our staff were inexperienced and we were inexperienced." And yet, within a few months, it was clear that *AVP* was going to be something special. "I remember seeing the 3D environment on screen for the very first time and thinking: 'This is going to be a good game.' It became clear that we had a killer application on our hands, and in consultation with Atari we decided to extend the development cycle."

Initially, however, Atari didn't even want a 3D title. Capcom's coin-op version of *Alien Vs Predator* (which inspired a 2D 16bit rendition) gave players a chance to play as a marine or Predator against the Aliens in a fairly straightforward scrolling beat 'em up. It was this sort of title that was initially pencilled in: "They wanted a scrolling fighter like *Double Dragon*," explains Kingsley. "But

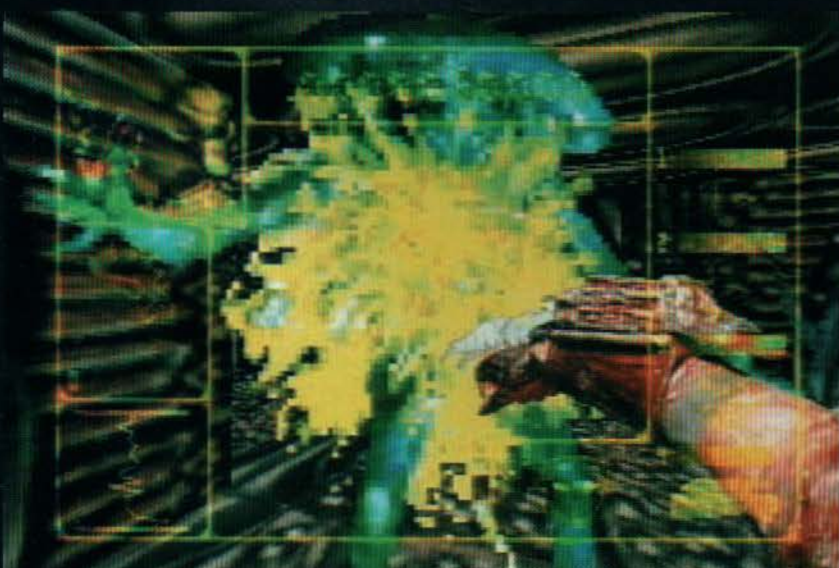

Along with *Tempest*, *AVP* became one of the most popular games on Jaguar

after some time we managed to convince them we could do a fully texture-mapped, 16bit, photographic-quality firstperson shooter in 2.5D, sort of raytraced, but with the walls staying vertical."

It was a brave design decision. At the time, the firstperson shooter had yet to establish itself. Id's *Wolfenstein 3D* had been available t those with high-end PCs, but *Doom* had yet to appear and the subsequent blossoming of the genr was just a distant dream. An equally brave decision was to give players the opportunity to play the bad guy, since they could choose to take on the role of marine, Predator *or* Alien. Consequently, *AVP contained* a significant degree of variety and a surprising narrative complexity. Set on a colonial marine training base infested with Aliens, there were thre goals: as a marine, to destroy the base and escape before it blows; as an Alien, to rescue the queen; and, as a Predator, to acquire honour by killing the Alien queen.

While the marine missions woul be readily identifiable to anyone familiar with today's narrative-base FPS titles, it's worth noting that, at the time, this was groundbreaking design, enhanced by a powerful survival horror sensibility that still fe fresh when it came to characterise much later titles such as *Alien: Resurrection*. It's an even more sizeable achievement when you

"It's worth noting that, at the time, this was groundbreaking design, enhanced by a powerful surviva horror sensibility that still felt fresh in much later titles"


Even now, ten years after release, the Kingsleys still receive unsolicited emails and letters from *AVP* fans saying how great the game was. Atari's test department lent a hand to balance the difficulty level of the game

consider that it was just one of three types of gameplay on offer. Deft design touches differentiated the other sections, such as the ability to cocoon enemies while an Alien, and to take over these new Aliens should you die – a neat way of emphasising their hive consciousness.

Predators, meanwhile, acquired better weapons according to how 'honourable' their kills were. And all the while, an unremittingly tense atmosphere was maintained by the lack of a musical score.

Underlying this sophisticated design were some remarkably old-fashioned processes rubbing shoulders with totally radical ones. "We designed the levels initially using grid-based graph paper and coloured pens," confirms Kingsley. "However, we used a totally revolutionary technique to create the sprites – to get them photorealistic. They were created by building and photographing models of the alien or predator, scanning the resulting 35mm prints and cutting them out in Deluxe Paint to create the six- or eight-frame animations of the sprites. For the marines we contacted a bloke who had bought one of the marine costumes from the film and photographed him in a range of poses. Wall panels were built on 9cm-by-9cm bits of cardboard, we photographed them and scanned them into the game. There was a lot of hands-on building of real wall textures in those days, real 'Blue Peter' development and none of your fancy graphics packages! It gave the game a photorealistic look that still works today. I've still got some of those panels somewhere too..."

The result was a game that's still remembered fondly today. Indeed, although the movie people gave Rebellion no input during development, according to Kingsley, they said that the finished product was the best game ever made from any of their licences. "When we look back at the game, we are still amazed at the level of technical and gameplay innovation that we managed to achieve," he continues. "Up to that point, I don't think I can recall a game that had much texture-mapping, let alone making the whole thing fully texture-mapped. Also, we are really proud of the photorealistic look – it took others several years to get anything close. There were lots of other great things too, but for me the icing on the cake was the Predator's very cool vision modes. Nobody had ever made a game like this before, even on PC, so the whole thing was new territory, we had nothing to build from or compare ourselves to."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, the game found itself tied to the fate of the Jaguar. It was undoubtedly the console's killer app, selling to a vast majority of the user base, but it was deprived of the broader audience of a console like the PlayStation. "I wonder what we would be doing now if the game had been the killer app on the PSone," agrees Kingsley. "But it was Rebellion's first born, and we have no regrets. The Jaguar was a great machine to write for, and Atari was, of course, one of the creators of the videogame business, so it was a great honour to be involved with them."

Indeed, it was undeniably *Alien Vs Predator* that set Rebellion on course for its eventual cross-media mini-empire: "It was our starting point and gave us the confidence to go on from there. We learned a lot about scheduling, about feature creep, and subsequently learned that we still had a load more learning to do. Everyone has to start somewhere and it was a great place to begin."

It was no surprise, then, when the Kingsleys returned to the licence to create an equally ambitious title for the PC, *Aliens Vs Predator*, five years later…



"One programmer came and went quite quickly, as he just couldn't do the maths," remembers Kingsley. "The game is fondly remembered enough for him to still be claiming to have been 'lead' on the project, though!"





"We got quite a lot of input from Atari, mostly: 'You guys can program for Jaguar, we've got a new team starting and we need you to tell them how it works,'" recalls Kingsley



RESET

Where yesterday's gaming goes to have a lie down

reload

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 68, February 1999

"Generation Tension". No, that's not the title of **Edge**'s low-budget polemic-filled debut album, but the significant words in **E**68's opening news piece, a lengthy article ruminating on PlayStation2 rumours. "Could the impending generational leap be a step too far, too soon?" asked the magazine, with the usual round of industry luminaries – Perry, Molyneux, Gard – replying: "Um, possibly." Reading about the Dreamcast and PS2 as next-generation seems kinda quaint now, but back then they were set to offer us unimaginable thrills. "The introduction of new console technology... will free up designers to explore more advanced ideas," speculated an **Edge** clearly not jaded by last issue's glimpses of *PenPen Trilcelon* and *Godzilla Generations*.

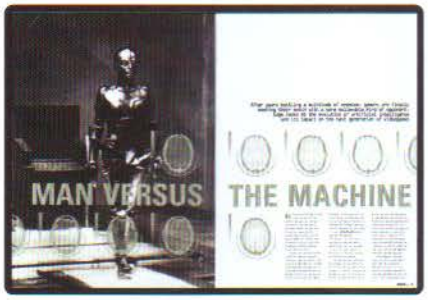
Not everyone was so thrilled about the dash for the future, however. Take Sega itself, which was clamping down on Dreamcast importers across the UK, claiming that the number of people calling them for Japanese translations was a significant drain on their resources. "If [Sega] didn't want the early adopters to hanker after its desirable device, then perhaps it shouldn't have told them about it..." was the caption to a picture of **Edge**'s three Dreamcast covers.

Yet more last-next-generation coverage bookended the magazine. Ex-EMI-UK head Jean-Francois Cecillion granted an audience to **Edge** to discuss his new role in charge of operations at Sega Europe. "I don't know what Sony's going to do," said the relaxed Frenchman, "But I guess it's going to be very good." Generation tension? Not yet, **Edge**, not yet...

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?
"Despite evidence like this, Jimy Fyn is unconvinced that Dreamcast's water-cooling system actually exists. What does he think runs through these pipes? Baked beans?" **Edge** ruminates on a new type of cooling system for the DC

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?
"Let's respect the competition, and admit that some companies did a very good job recently and we haven't. They are the mistakes of the past. We won't make them again." Well, Sega's JF Cecillion talks a good game, at least

TESTSCREENS AND RATINGS:
Sonic Adventure (DC; 8/10), *Ridge Racer Type 4* (PS; 8/10), *Blood 2: The Chosen* (PC; 7/10), *Moto Racer 2* (PC; 7/10), *South Park* (N64; 4/10), *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron* (N64/PC; 5/10), *Ehrgeiz* (PS; 7/10), *Akuji the Heartless* (PS/PC: 5/10), *Max Power Racing* (PS; 5/10)



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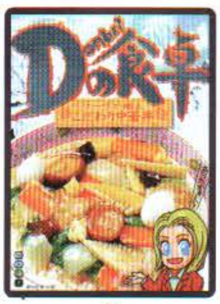
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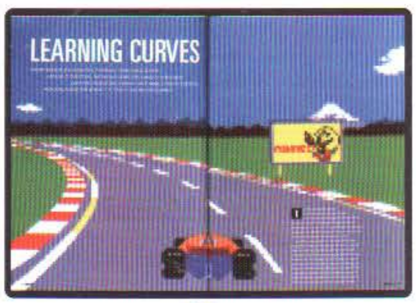
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1. Man vs the Machine: a look at AI 2. An early shot of *Shenmue* 3. *Tenkomori Shooting* – like *GunBullet*, only weirder 4. 'Final Fantasy VIII: The Movie' is in production, says Out There 5. Molyneux, Meier, Shelley and Romero at Milia 6. *Sonic Adventure*: "Wonderfully absorbing" 7. Kenji Eno's Christmas gift to journalists: food! 8. Still gathering dust in the **Edge** office, a near-incomprehensible Sega calendar 9. *Powerstone* promises to "assist in vindicating Sega's claim of next-generation superiority" 10. Things that make **Edge** go 'vroom' – driving evolution

inbox

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I'd just like to ask a quick question of all those people out there that are arguing for TV shows about games. Have you really thought this through? Think about it: the most popular game-related TV show was 'GamesMaster', but it was a kids' show that used games as the entertainment, not a factual show. Factual shows about games tend to fall on their arse because, like literature, it is not art until it is finished. Until then it's just a load of figures and symbols. And don't even get me started on 'The Making Of Enter The Matrix'.

Also, you could count on one set of fingers the number of 'characters' in the videogame industry. How many times could these individuals be interviewed about the same, years-long project before it gets repetitive? I'm afraid it's either that or constant interviews with Dave The Coder on how he got rid of that annoying clipping problem. All fun and information for you coders out there, but until then I think I'll stick with those Chris Nolan interviews for now.

Michael Grey

You don't see many movie engineers (directors, cameramen or whatever) appearing in interviews because it's obviously all about the stars, and perhaps interviews in the gaming realm will remain as limited in appeal to the mainstream as they are today until someone develop's the world's first self-aware game character who can 'appear' at a press event and speak for itself. Shall we say... 2053?

With regard to videogame TV programmes, I don't know why you and most of your readers are moaning. How many programs reviewing movies are on TV? There's 'Film 2003' with Jonathan Ross (on at some ridiculous hour) and I can't think of any more. Plus gamers have the luxury of having hundreds of different magazines with demo discs. What do film fans get? Maybe a DVD full of trailers as an annual gift. I think you have it better than you seem to realise.

As for "are games art?", like all art, if it is presented as art then it is – but games aren't. They're made and then sold. Maybe a game designer should enter 'his' (few games are the vision of one man nowadays) game into an art contest. Or gallery. Present it as art and then it will be recognised as such.

Stan Peach

I'd like to respond to Peter Basma-Lord's letter, regarding the way videogames are represented on television.

To dismiss 'GamePad' for being "behind the times" is hardly fair. The latest, 'GamePad 4', is currently enjoying its first run on Bravo and is not in the least bit behind the times. These shows are never behind the times when they are made. Sure, Bravo tends to repeat them, but this doesn't mean you should dismiss them simply because you catch a repeat, and not the original broadcast.

It is true that the previous series, 'GamePad 3' is currently still being repeated (on a Freeview channel, FTN, now). However, this was not "behind the times" when it was made. It is simply a repeat. And do you know why they repeat these shows? Because the audience actually builds over time.

Hardcore gamers may want their news and reviews hot off the internet, but there are plenty of people out there who enjoy games regardless of whether they're on the new releases list or not.

We have tried to make 'GamePad 4' as feature-led as possible, focusing on games culture and interviews, rather than the latest reviews. This is something I prefer to do when possible, whether the show is repeated or not, as I believe it's a more mature approach. I think the breadth of games coverage you get on TV now is very interesting. 'Gamezville' and 'GamePad', for instance, are both shows about games, but they are still very different programmes aimed at very different audiences.

Anyway, I'd better shut up now, before I start repeating myself.

Violet Berlin

Ah, videogames and violence! It just never seems to go away. As US lawyer Jack Thompson gets on his lobby horse condemning videogames for all of the world's ills, we gamers sit back knowing that such talk is ludicrous. After all, it is people with guns who kill people, and the majority of 'game-induced' violence occurs in countries where firearms are much more accessible. The violent act was likely to happen anyway because, let's face it, these people were obviously of that disposition, no doubt torturing animals in between gaming sessions. We just do not believe that a game can turn a normal, sane person into a ruthless psychopath.

However, should we gamers be taking such a lax attitude? Are we really unaffected by what we perceive and enjoy in games?

Many games are based on violence – even Mario kills his cuddly adversaries with a well-timed jump to the head, but this gets around the issue because, like cartoon violence, it is all abstract – there is no blood spilt so it's OK, kids!

With the ever-advancing graphic abilities of home systems, the depiction of violence in games is reaching new levels of realism, and with it there is a worrying trend of games being marketed on those grounds. Games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Soldier of Fortune* were well known for the graphic way in which enemies could be disposed of, but take that away and the actual game mechanics were average at best. Despite this, these games were successful, with people drawn in by this ghoulish freak factor. The idea of using violence as a marketing ploy, and the fact that people bought it, is something I find very uncomfortable!

Personally, I am not into heavily violent games, with the most graphic probably being *MGS2*. Even then you were encouraged to go around stunning the guards. In those moments when such considerate action was not possible – the sudden 'you-or-them' scenarios – I had to go for the live amunition. The results of this switch were made all the more shocking in going from sleeping adversaries to the dead and bloodied bodies before me. But maybe that's just me.

Games are growing up with their audience, and

"If it is presented as art then it is, but games aren't... Maybe a game designer should enter 'his' game into an art contest. Present it as art and then it will be recognised as such"



GTAIII: an 18-rated game that is "tremendous fun for all ages," according to one magazine

there is no reason why violence in adult-orientated games can't be handled in a considered manner. However, with the likes of the morally ambiguous and graphic *Manhunt* around, perhaps it is time that the games industry, and we gamers, should take a step back and examine the need and depiction of violence in games. In doing so we may finally get some recognition for acting responsibly within the media. I would be curious to know what a gaming collection says about the gamer...
Chris Whyte

Perhaps this would make an interesting feature. We could get a psychologist to examine various collections and compile comprehensive profiles. But would you really want to know the findings?

The non-videogame press has done it again! Issue 785 of a certain car magazine has two pages of game reviews, all racing games or car-related games including the *GTA Double Pack*. No doubt they have a large readership and will probably influence more than a few dads on what games to buy for the young ones this christmas. Now, taking into account the bad press games like *GTA* recieve from shallow-minded individuals using them as a scapegoat to explain some mindless gun crime or other, you would think this magazine would be responsible in their review. You would be wrong though. They ACTUALLY described *GTA* as, and I quote: "Tremendous fun for all ages."

Did they review a different version of the games or something? Oh, hang on a minute, I almost forgot – videogames are just a bit of fun for kids, aren't they?
Phill Copes

I am writing to Inbox after reading and chuckling at Chris Ward's letter (**E**131). The chuckle was a nervous release of giddy joy as I realised that some **Edge** readers were just normal, they're not all obsessive fanboys or hardcore-super-elite-gamers. And thank God. The casual gamer is intelligent enough and discerning enough to prefer **Edge** to another publication and that can only be a good thing.

I also agree with Chris that my games collection is a result of much deliberation, and a lot of help from your reviews. I can't afford to buy 14 games per year – my game-buying habits are dictated by a long-term strategy that considers collectability (current or pending) and potential trade-in value.

My point is this: **Edge** talk about the hardcore gamer as their main readership, but I would argue that this is not correct and also that it may well be excluding a potentially new readership.
Stephen Walrond

It's difficult to strike any kind of balance that maintains continuity. All we can say is that we're committed to focusing on the best in videogaming – whether that's an EyeToy minigame or a comparitivity obscure wargame from Japan.

Last month's excellent article regarding why games aren't completed got me thinking about my own collection. A quick scan through revealed at least the following uncompleted games: *Metroid Prime*, *Zelda: The Wind Waker*, *Resident Evil 0* and *Eternal Darkness*.

Completed games included *Dead to Rights*, *Luigi's Mansion*, *Ico* and, most recently, *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*. I believe that *Metroid Prime* and *Zelda: The Wind Waker* are better games than *Dead to Rights* and *Luigi's Mansion*, yet they remain uncompleted. I don't believe the reason is that they are too difficult, it's just that they are too big.

I remember playing *Prime* for a few days non-stop and noticing that I was about four per cent through the game. It completely put me off. It's a bit like being presented with a huge meal in the States – it puts you off eating at all.

Both *Ico* and *Prince of Persia* are structured perfectly. You get a sense very quickly that you are making progress and you rarely have to backtrack. *Prince of Persia* takes things a step further with the percentage complete at each stage. I completed both these games in around ten hours and both left me wanting more. This is how a game should make you feel. They both still represented excellent value for money.

Recently we have seen a film broken down into two parts ('Kill Bill') with a lot of commercial success. If something like *The Wind Waker* was broken down into two games, I would have been happy buying both games and I am sure a lot of people would do the same.
Andy Shearer

Man, I used to think you guys were cool. But 8/10 for *Manhunt* accompanied by text that actually seemed to apologise for the game is ridiculous. Anyone who's played *Manhunt* will surely see this review as a level-three disembowelling of **Edge**'s integrity.

I know you and Rockstar North have had beef in the past – is this **Edge**'s apology? Or were you worried Rockstar were waiting for you in the shadows, rustling their plastic bags whenever a lower score was mentioned?
John Norris

Yes, Rockstar was waiting there in the shadows, rustling plastic bags – plastic bags full of bribe money! Hey, working on **Edge** has its perks...

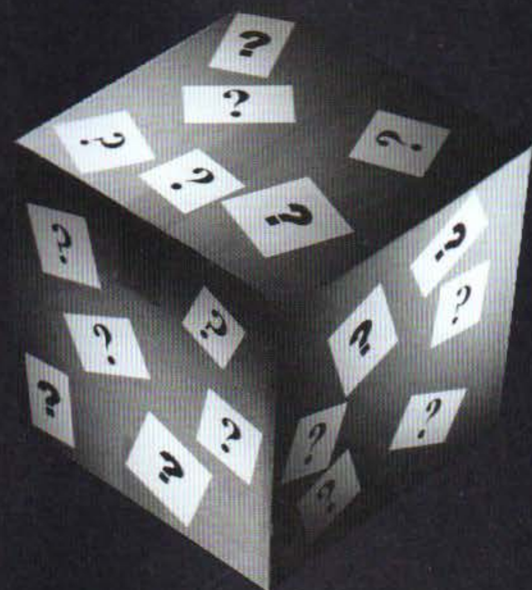
I was just browsing some gaming forums I frequent when I came across a link to a thread whose contents were quite harrowing to me as a long-time fan of a certain British developer, with a load of (ex-)employees ranting about how the influence of money has torn the company to shreds and left the staff in a state of deeply low morale and on the verge of quitting for pastures new. Is it real? Have things really gotten that bad at one of Britain's greatest software firms? More disturbingly, how much of this has been caused by the company's owner higher up the chain?

The times, it seems, are bleak indeed.
Richard Barnes

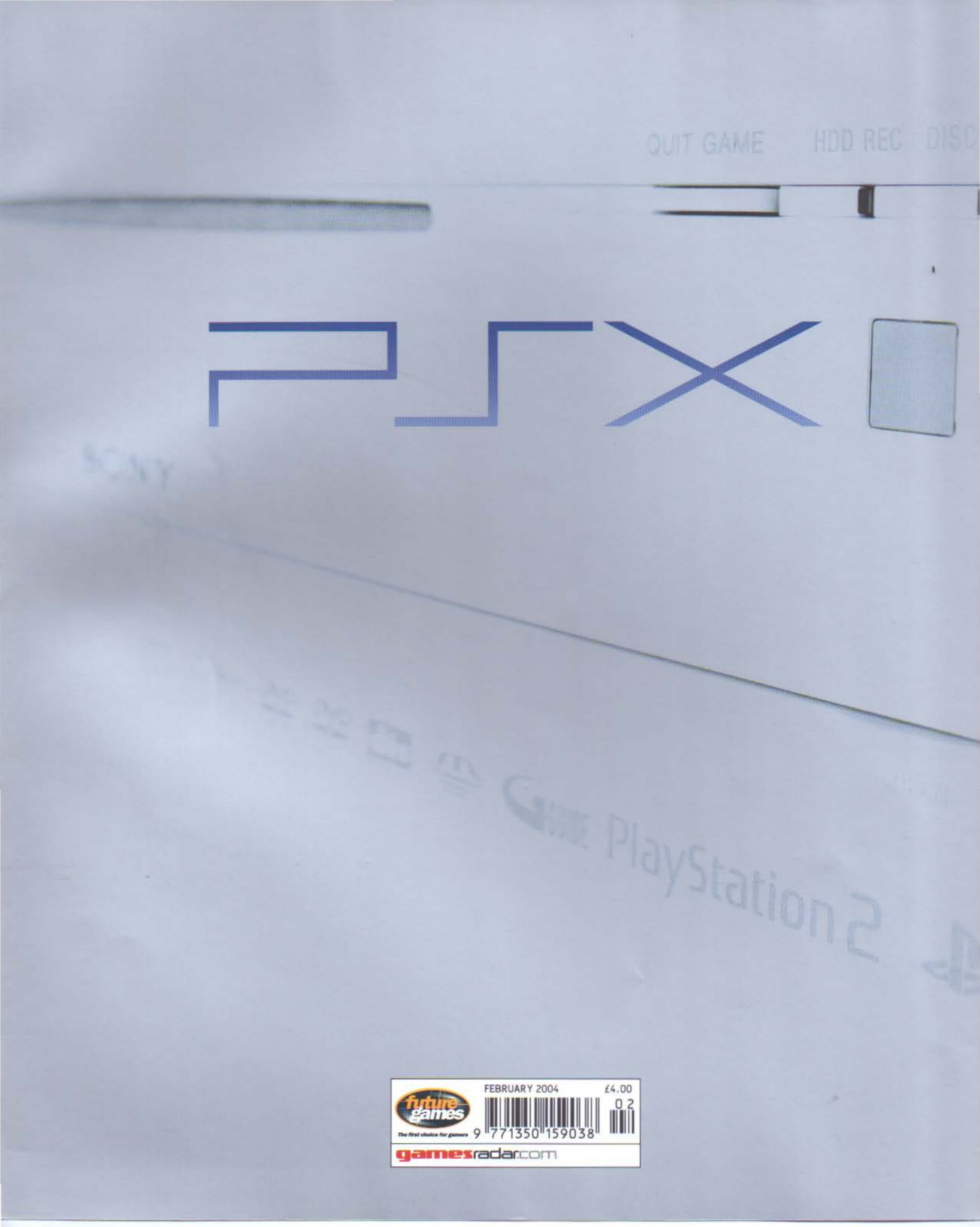
> "Both Ico and Prince of Persia are structured perfectly. You get a sense you are making progress and you rarely have to backtrack... This is how a game should make you feel"

Next month:

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